MORIBITO

夢の守り人

上橋菜穂子

二木真希子―絵

The Guardian of the Dreams

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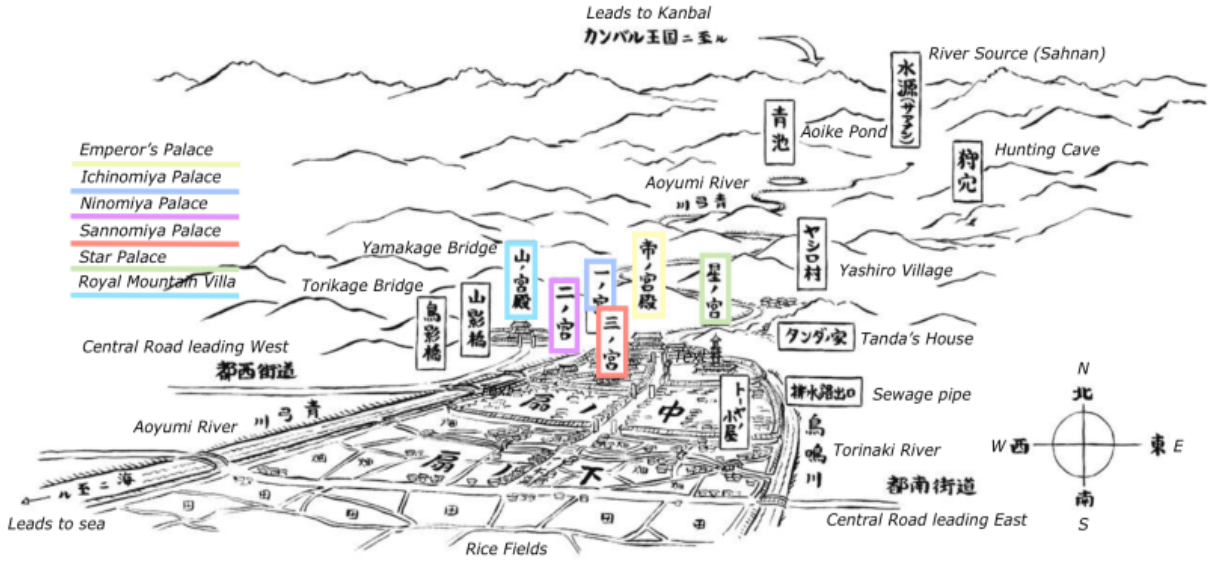
Map of Kosenkyo



This is a map of Kosenkyo, New Yogo's capital. The city is shaped like a fan and hence divided into three parts:

Ogi no Kami – the handle of the fan. This is where all the palaces are.

Ogi no Naka (□□□) – the centre of the fan. This is where the nobility live. It's divided from Ogi no Kami by a high plastered wall.

Ogi no Shimo (□□□) – edge of the fan. This is where the common folk live.

Prologue

In the square of a certain village in Rota Kingdom, New Yogo Kingdom's western neighbour, an elderly singer was lying collapsed on the ground. This man, the deeply loved wandering singer Rosetta, was singing and waving to the crowds at the village's night festival, when he suddenly fell onto his back...

In the dark of night, the square was filled with people's anxious voices and the crackling of a bonfire. For Rosetta though, all these sounds seemed like the distant murmur of a rising tide, and only the star-filled sky seemed near.

Suddenly, Rosetta felt his body growing lighter. It started to rise all by itself, as if he were floating in water. But when he looked down, he could still see himself lying on the ground.

My soul is moving away from my body...

He was not completely separated from his body, though. A single shining thread stretched out from the body's forehead, connecting him to it. Rosetta was steadily moving farther away from his body, stretching this thread of light.

The time to face death had come. At this rate, the thread joining his soul to his body would soon snap, and his soul would be sucked into the afterlife. That is, if he were a normal person.

Like a comet with a white shining tail trailing behind it, Rosetta flew through the dark, empty air at amazing speed. Interestingly, even though he was now just a soul, he still felt as if he had his arms, legs and a body. He enjoyed the flight, paddling with his arms and flapping his legs through the air, as if swimming.

In his chest he felt a burning heat. When he put his hands to it, something lightly fell into them. As he looked at it, a lonely smile broke out on Rosetta's face. It was a small and faintly glowing flower seed.

Ah, I'm really going to die, then.

His whole life ran through his mind like a very long ballad. Rosetta gently whispered to the seed with an air of loneliness.

My time is up. And so your time begins.

He decided where to plant the seed long ago; a beautiful lake surrounded by mountains in New Yogo, a neighbouring kingdom that he had travelled ten years ago. There could be no more suitable place for it to sprout.

Now, I must dream of the wooden palace in the middle of that lake. Just like the one in the ballad I used to love singing in those days. There I will let this seed sprout.

The second the thought took shape in his mind, his soul passed over a great distance, and he found himself floating above the lake in the foreign kingdom. In this mountain lake, just like in those in his own kingdom, song-loving spirits dwelled. They welcomed his dying soul for the last time.

Rosetta was sucked into the lake, though he did not feel its coldness. He simply slipped into the calm water, reminiscent of the bluish tint of dawn.

He could see a deep darkness below, welcoming the souls of the dead to the afterlife. He saw someone's soul being drawn into the darkness, within which it would forget all memories of its life and once again be reborn. Without undergoing this, a soul could not return to the land of the living.

Rosetta's soul, however, was not drawn in. He easily stopped at the edge of the darkness.

The husk of the seed he was holding in his palm suddenly cracked open and pale light burst forth from it, spreading outwards to surround him in a bubble, separating him from the darkness with a thin membrane.

Rosetta closed his eyes and dreamed. He dreamed of a magnificent, beautiful, wooden palace. Inside it there was a massive garden, and water gushed out from a swollen spring right in its centre.

When he opened his eyes he was standing before it. He smiled and carefully dropped the seed into the spring. As soon as the seed fell from his hand, he felt a terrible fatigue come over him. Even standing became difficult, and he dropped onto the ground next to the spring.

Maybe I'll just sleep like this.

As he thought that, a shadow fell on his face. When he opened his heavy eyelids, a youth was looking down at him. His face was exactly like Rosetta's when he was younger.

"Thank you, Rosetta. The seed of the Flower sprouted safely. Now, the Flower will become the new darkness of the afterlife, and your soul will be reborn. Once the flower bears a new seed, the person you will have become will protect and raise it as their host. You will sleep inside the Flower and the Flower will sleep inside you. With this, the next revolution of the forever-rotating wheel of time begins. Please, with your last breaths, sing a song to invite the soul of the Mother who will send your soul, which is tied to mine, to be reborn."

A song?

Rosetta smiled, distorting his wrinkle covered face. Singing had always been a part of his life.

Yes, I will sing. I will sing my final song.

Rosetta slightly opened his mouth and breathed in for the last time. He then let out his song.

The world of the Flower shook, making the lake shake too. The song became a gently-blowing wind that touched many souls and drew them to the lake. They were the souls of dreaming people. Among the sleeping people in the villages and towns near the lake, the souls of those close to death were attracted by the sad and beautiful singing.

The youth sitting next to Rosetta turned to face one of the souls. "Let's invite that girl. Despite being tattered, hurt, and drawn to death, her soul is shining so beautifully. Oh, how intense and strong a shine! Moreover, to be able to come to this lake in her sleep, on this night... This girl is sufficiently powerful to become the Mother of the soul which will host the Flower."

Rosetta didn't answer. He had already faded until he was nearly invisible.

The youth stood up and climbed into the pale blue darkness to welcome the girl he had fallen in love with at first sight.

That night, the poor, ugly girl sleeping on the shore of a lake surrounded by mountains had a beautiful dream. In this dream she fell in love with a youth living in a wooden palace and gave birth to a son.

When the girl woke up from her dream she threw away the life she had lived so far.

As time passed the girl became a magic weaver whose name resounded throughout the world.

Since the night of the sprouting, fifty-two years have passed, and the Flower once again approached its time of full bloom…

For those interested:

1. Rota is written □□ in katakana
2. Rosetta is written □□□□□ in katakana

Chapter 1 Part 1

The one loved by the echoes

Balsa was dreaming.

In the dream she was standing in a grassy plain after the sun had set. It was pitch black, devoid even of starlight, as if the surroundings were smeared with black paint. All that remained was the rustling of the grass tickling her knees.

Why did she feel so melancholy? The wind moved the grass, and the grass moved her heart. A sound like that of a high-pitched flute was rising from beneath her feet and blowing her hair upwards.

Upon feeling the sensation of someone touching her hair, Balsa suddenly awoke.

But, to avoid giving away that she was awake, she did not open her eyes. She remained motionless as if still asleep while trying to sense the one who had touched her hair.

Balsa was a warrior. Even in her sleep, she should have been able to sense someone who was close enough to touch her hair, especially now that she was sleeping out in the open. Even while sleeping heavily enough to dream, a part of her was supposed to always be alert.

A rat crawled through the undergrowth with a rustle but paid Balsa no attention. She thought she had felt someone touching her hair, but there was no one nearby. There was just no way she wouldn't detect someone close enough to touch her hair, no matter how skilled they were.

It must have been the dream. Or was there an evil spirit lurking around here?

Balsa slowly released her built-up tension and opened her eyes. The smell of earth, moist with dew, filled the air, and she could faintly see a grove of trees in the pale blue darkness of dawn.

The sleepy silence was shattered by the sound of desperate footsteps pursued by rowdy voices; several people were approaching from the direction of the mountain stream below.

Balsa got out from the oil paper she wrapped herself in while sleeping, carefully avoiding unnecessary noise, and grabbed her trusty short spear as she rose from the ground. When she looked down at the stream through a gap in the trees, she could just about see a man running in desperation across the slippery rocks from downstream.

Three men were chasing him. They were wearing bear skins but they were not hunters. Hunters in New Yogo don't bear swords. They looked more like mercenaries hired by a caravan. Amongst them was also a man with a bow,

but since he didn’t seem to be using it, they probably didn't want to kill the runaway. They probably had a reason to capture him alive.

Balsa frowned at her newfound grasp of the situation. The runaway being outnumbered didn't necessarily make the ones chasing him the bad guys. Since they weren't trying to kill him, there surely wasn’t any need for an outsider to interfere. Still, after seeing the desperation with which the man was running away, leaving him alone would make anyone feel bad. Balsa mentally clicked her tongue.

With that, a strange thing happened. Despite surely having no time to look around, as desperate as he was to not slip on the moss covered stones, suddenly he lifted up his face and looked up straight at where Balsa stood as if he knew she was there.

The second their eyes met, Balsa stepped back without thinking.

Impossible.

How did that man notice her in the shadow of a tree grove barely lit by dawn? His face blended in with the darkness and she could barely see it. She could only tell that he was looking up at her expectantly.

In that second her heart was set. She jerked her chin, beckoning him. He immediately changed direction and started desperately climbing towards her.

"Hey! He's planning to run into the thicket!" one of the pursuers shouted. Hearing this, Balsa furrowed her brow. It was a language she hadn't expected to hear here.

That’s Sangalese. Why are the Sangalese so deep in the northern mountains?

The Kingdom of Sangal was in the far south. Even travelling by horse, the nearest border was ten days away.

The man who shouted before looked like he was used to walking around in swamps and was pulling ahead, steadily gaining on his prey. The runaway was breathing heavily, grasping at grass and tree roots to pull his body up when the pursuer finally caught up.

"You bastard! What a waste of time and effort..." The moustached pursuer stretched his arms forwards and tried grabbing the runaway's clothing, throwing himself off balance.

The second he thought he grabbed the runaway's sash, a small rock hit his hand, pushing it away. Collapsed on the hillside, he shouted in pain as he gripped his right hand with his left, and lifted up his face only to stop moving as if frozen.

The sharpened, white tip of a spear was thrust right in front of his nose.

He slowly looked up at the shadow holding the spear, dumbfounded. It was a woman a year or two past thirty. Her matte black hair was pulled into an easy ponytail and she was wearing somewhat dirty travelling clothes. Seeing the woman's calm gaze, the pursuer couldn't help thinking that she was battle-hardened.

"I see... Seeing your face up close explains a bit." The woman mumbled. "Considering the sword you carry, you must be a slave hunter. One of the Galcinba."

The pursuer's face showed his surprise.

"You... How do you..?" As soon as he voiced his disbelief, blood started flowing from a single point on his forehead and poured into his eyes. He shouted and covered his face with both his hands. Before he could even tell what was happening, Balsa had cut up his forehead with shallow cuts.

With his eyes blinded by the flowing blood, the pursuer staggered to his feet off the hillside, trying to find a foothold. Balsa approached from his side as if to pass by him and dealt him a knockout blow to his solar plexus with her left fist. With a jerk the pursuer's knees folded and he fell forwards losing consciousness.

"Hey, what's going on..." The remaining two pursuers finally caught up, but stopped at the startling sight of a silhouette running at them from amongst the trees in the grove. They noticed it was holding a short spear and hurriedly put their hands on their hilts, pulling out their swords. Since they've been running their breathing was laboured, but their battle readiness spoke of some skill.

The pursuers were in a hurry to catch the runaway before he ran into the mountains, but they made no careless moves. The spear stance of the woman in front of their eyes spoke of her extensive experience in battle. They could find no openings.

They were also perplexed. They were in the middle of the Misty Blue Mountains which spread out to the north of the New Yogo Kingdom. No matter how you looked at it though, this woman was neither from New Yogo, nor one of the indigenous Yakoo. A solidly built body and features were the mark of the people of Kanbal, a kingdom north of the Misty Blue Mountains.

"Just who are you..?" One of the men called out in halting Kanbalese.

Balsa let out a chuckle. "No need to force yourself to use Kanbalese, Galcinba." When she answered them so in Sangalese their eyes opened wide in surprise.

"There has been some misunderstanding. We're mercenaries hired to protect a Sangalese caravan. That man is a thief who stole some goods..."

As soon as he said that, a young man spoke, trying to discredit him. "That's a lie. I didn't steal anything!"

The pursuers' eyes were drawn somewhere behind Balsa. Seeing their expressions relax, Balsa clicked her tongue in annoyance.

What an idiot. I thought he would have ran away long ago...

"Cut the crap." Balsa swung her spear sharply. "I know what having a jewel stuck crookedly on the right side of a sword's hilt means. I don't care what kind of dirty jobs you do in Sangal, but I won't let you hunt people here in Yogo. The Blue Hand aren't that forgiving."

The pursuers' expressions quickly became grim. "I see, you're Blue Hand. In that case, we can't let you live."

The Blue Hand was the name of a human trafficking organisation in Yogo. Balsa, of course, was not part of such an organisation, but as she predicted it fooled the pursuers nicely.

The men started to close the distance between themselves and Balsa. Their swords were thick and curved, the kind that displayed their full power on the downswing. These were originally used for horseback fighting. The sword blades weren't too long, meaning the pursuers could attack quickly. Balsa's spear was only up to her shoulders but even then, her speed should be nothing compared to theirs.

The pursuers weren't attacking though. They were hesitating, waiting for Balsa's attack, planning to slip past her spear to aim for her breast. They were hoping she would attack one of them, so the other could finish her off.

In the meantime, Balsa was inspecting their footholds and measuring the distance between the two of them. She was vividly imagining all the various moves they could make in this situation. Finally, like an ebbing tide, their unease diminished and a white-hot silence filled their hearts.

Balsa walked forwards. She walked normally, almost as if walking towards a friend. The men were perplexed for a second by her actions, but with a single glance at each other the man on the left moved out of the short spear's reach and started to move behind Balsa.

He was waiting for Balsa to attack his companion so that he could hurl his sword at her from behind. His thick, heavy sword. It would end in a fatal wound wherever it hit.

Despite this Balsa carelessly stepped within the range of the man in front of her with seemingly no care for the one behind.

When she attacked, neither of the men saw what happened. Naturally the man behind her saw nothing, but the man who she attacked fared no better. He only felt a sudden, burning pain in his right knee. A moment later, when the man screamed with the intense pain of a cut tendon and toppled into the river bed, Balsa quickly jumped aside, turning around.

The other man, having forgotten to throw his sword at Balsa, fixed his stance in a panic and faced her once more. He felt a paralysing fear. He didn't even see her spear moving before.

When Balsa started approaching, he took a step back without thinking. With that, he thought he was out of the short spear's range. That's why, when he felt as if his knee was being stabbed with a white-hot poker, he looked down at his knee in astonishment, then back up at Balsa. Without even screaming, he crumpled into the river bed with a thud. He felt as if he were stabbed by a long, invisible spear.

The man lost all will to fight, but Balsa only passed him by once she put the sword out of his reach.

"Why didn't you move to the right side of the man on the right and attack from there?" A carefree voice asked.

When Balsa raised her head, she saw the young runaway walking towards her. He was maybe slightly older than twenty and too thin, but tall, like a crane. He had common features of a part Yogo, part Yakoo, but his pale brown eyes left an impression. "If you moved to one side, you could have fought them one by one..."

Balsa stormed up to the youth, grabbed his elbow and turned him back towards the grove. "Are you an idiot? If you've got the time to be talking without a care in the world, you should be getting as far away from here as possible."

"But there were only three pursuers. They're all done with, aren't they?"

"I only knocked out the first one. He should be coming to soon."

"Eh, you didn't kill him?"

Balsa stared at his face. "Why should I kill someone for a stranger’s sake? If anything, I'm relieved I could go easy on them."
Balsa hurried the youth on, back to the place where she was sleeping earlier to gather her things quickly. After that, they went down the mountain path towards a swamp at first, then walked back on top of rocks to not leave behind any footprints. They only went deeper into the mountains once they've found a very faint animal trail.

A bit past noon, Balsa and the youth stopped to rest at a meadow where some water seeping out from amongst the rocks formed a small lake.

Even though they were in the middle of the mountains, the early summer sun warmed the air, so that they were covered with sweat. Once they had drank as much of the cold and sweet spring water as they wanted and washed their faces, they felt alive again.

Balsa frequently stole glances at the youth who was sitting with his legs stretched out under some tree roots. What an oddly dressed youth. Worn

out gray robes that a Yogoese commoner might wear, held together with an expensive brocade sash. A bag was hanging diagonally from his shoulders and even though it was well used you could tell it was an expensive item.

His arms, legs and neck were slim and long, like a woman's. His features were truly ordinary, but his clear, pale brown eyes stood out surprisingly much.

A travelling performer, maybe a singer...

If he were a singer travelling between towns and villages, then he could have gotten an expensive sash and bag from intoxicating rich merchants' wives with his songs, then in wandering singer fashion, used those items to bewitch even more people. But still, he wasn't jaded or stubborn like most travelling performers.

"I just don't understand..." Balsa slowly shook her head. "If you were a beautiful girl, I'd understand. But why is the Galcinba targeting someone like you?"

The youth cocked his head. "So, you mentioned them before too. Who are the Galcinba exactly?"

"Ehh, you don’t know who kidnapped you?" After asking that with an amazed look on her face, Balsa changed her mind and mumbled something. "Or maybe it’s normal. I suppose many wouldn’t know who kidnapped them until they were sold."

"Hmm. I remember passing out drunk at the inn but, surprisingly, when I came to I was in a wicker clothes hamper. I got very annoyed. I was very thirsty, but gagged, so I couldn't even scream. Somewhere along the way though, I got taken out of the hamper, and made to drink some awful-tasting water. Must have been some sleeping drugs. But luckily..." The youth laughed. “I've always been more resistant to medicines than others. Because of that I've had quite a few problems, but this time it kind of helped. I woke up a bit before dawn. Thinking the drugs were still working, they had their guard down, so I used that opening to run away, that's all."

Balsa shrugged her shoulders. "Then you really were lucky. Galcinba are Sangalese slave hunters. Their 'specialty' is kidnapping beautiful girls and then selling them to rich merchants or nobility. Apparently, they mix drugs into the victims' wine so that they fall asleep, then carry them off in hampers before they wake up. They pretend to be a normal caravan while taking the girls to their destination. Not only is it a dirty job, but if they're found kidnapping people in foreign countries they'll get into serious trouble, so they generally disguise themselves as merchants or mercenaries. They apparently work in groups of five, but since it's a pretty big organisation, many of them don't know each other. To avoid getting in each other's way or going after the same prey, they carry swords with a jewel crookedly stuck to the handle to show they are in the middle of a job. Like those guys did..."

The youth was listening with his mouth agape. "Amazing. How do you know all this?"

Balsa suddenly felt like messing with the youth a bit. "That's because it's about my competitors, you see. You escaped from the wolf's fangs only to run into a bear's claws."

The youth gave a strained laugh. "There's no way you're with the Blue Hand, right?"

"You seem so sure, but the whole reason you got into this kidnapping mess is because you believe people too easily, isn't it?"

The youth didn't say anything and kept smiling. His expression and behaviour made Balsa feel a sense of discomfort she couldn't quite place.

"Well, anyway... I'm about to starve to death. On top of not having any breakfast, I've been forced to run around since early morning. Since we seem to have lost them for good, let's have lunch here."

Balsa took out from her bag some dried deer meat and a hard pastry that looked like it would keep a while. When she gave half of it to the youth, he proceeded to stuff his face happily. With his mouth full of the pastry smelling of a fragrant fruit, he mumbled. "This is *jocom* isn't it?"

Balsa arched her eyebrows. "Yes, I'm surprised you know it. It is *jocom*. Not only does it keep for more than half a month, it's a very filling and convenient pastry."

"Some Kanbalese men coming to work here shared some with me once. You're Kanbalese as well, right?"

"By birth, at least."

With an 'ah' the youth scratched his head. "I haven't thanked you for saving me yet. I'm sorry. I haven't told you my name either."

Balsa smiled. "It would seem so."

"As I should have said long ago, thank you very, very much for saving my life. My name is Yugno." The youth knelt and with his forehead touching the ground, gave Balsa the most respectful Yogoese bow.

"I'm Balsa. I'm a travelling bodyguard. I've got nothing to do with the Blue Hand so you can stop worrying."

Yugno laughed with a carefree look on his face. "I see... A bodyguard! You're interesting, like a riddle. Even though you're Kanbalese you speak Yogoese and Sangalese, despite being a woman you're a crazy strong short spear user. I wonder what the answer to this riddle is."

"You, on the other hand look like an entertainer from top to bottom. But specifically, a singer?" While Balsa asked with a bitter smile, Yugno's eyes grew big with surprise.

"Well, yes... That's amazing, I'm astonished."

"Because of my line of work, I meet various people, you see. But I still have no clue why Galcinba is interested in a singer. I'm sure there are plenty of good singers in Sangal too."

Yugno stood up and walked to the edge of the lake, where he leaned over and scooped water with both his hands. After drinking his fill, he turned to

Balsa. "Surely there are many who were blessed with a good voice. But there probably aren't many like me, who were gifted with a destiny."

Something in the youth's tone of voice made the nape of Balsa's neck tingle.

"I had you save my life. So I'd like to sing to you, not as part of my job, but my true song."

Balsa panicked and raised her hand. "Wait a minute. Singing here would be bad."

Yugno narrowed his eyes, as if in response to something Balsa couldn’t hear. "It's ok. It seems that there is no one within hearing range." He smiled with his eyes. "And you're probably worried, since you know about that legend which says that anyone who sings in the middle of the mountains by a body of water will be cursed, but you don't have to be. Once you hear the song, you'll understand."

Yugno drew on his body's strength, took a relaxed stance and closed his eyes. He quietly took a breath. Strangely, all surrounding noise became quieter and quieter, like a whirlpool suddenly disappearing, until Balsa couldn't even hear her own breath and complete silence descended.

She did hear Yugno’s intake of breath; it was like the sound of stalks of grass rustling in the wind. Eventually it started sounding like a gentle melody. When that happened Balsa's skin, stomach, her whole body felt the start of a mysterious vibration.

Yugno's voice shook the air more lightly than the wind, more delicately than a ripple. From the surrounding trees and grass countless voices, some thin and high, some low and rich, mysterious voices of indescribable melodiousness, sounded. Like weaving thread, the voices came together to create a sound and the many sounds weaved together too. Balsa's entire body felt as if it were being shaken by a wave, bubbling. Even her consciousness was captured by this irresistible sensation.

Things she had no names for, that gave her body and her heart shape, were resonating with Yugno’s voice one by one, trembling. The rising joy wrapped around the whirlpool of sound and climbed towards heaven, disappearing.

Even after all the sounds stopped, Balsa didn't move. She saw nothing and heard nothing.

Eventually when she became able to see her surroundings, and the sounds of the forest returned, Balsa was surprised to find that she could see everything much more clearly than usual. Everything seemed more beautiful. It was similar to when the sky clears up after a terrible storm. The green of the forest shone brightly and she could suck up the forest's essence through the back of her nose deep inside her head.

Only now did her chest start to feel tight as tears flowed from her eyes. When she was listening to the song even her feelings disappeared. Balsa covered her face with both hands and sat still, but eventually she looked up at the youth. "That was… something. You must be Li Tou Ruen, ‘the one loved by the echoes'. Isn't that right? I didn't believe such a thing existed until now..."

Yugno sat by Balsa's side. "Yes. I was born to a very ordinary farmer. I just loved singing. During work, during festivals, even when wooing a girl I liked, songs were my allies. The songs... how do I put this, made me popular. But I think my parents were worried. Parents have good intuition when it comes to their children, don’t they. My mother always said 'don't sing in the mountains, especially not near lakes or swamps'. That's been a saying since long ago, right? People say that near bodies of water song loving spirits, the Li or echoes live, and if a child with a good voice sings near them, they'll be attracted to them and come to possess them. The Li's song also apparently gives humans a very long life. But if you're seen by them even once, you'll never be able to live as a normal human again, apparently..."

Yugno smiled bitterly. "I only deeply understood the correctness of mother's words later. But when I was thirteen I wanted to see if the Li would be attracted to my song, I was hopeless. I wanted to prove that I was an extraordinary enough singer for the Li to come look at me. I was and they gave me an almost terrifyingly wonderful joy. But in exchange they took it all. Everything of mine up until that point, and even the future I would have had from then on."

Yugno glanced at Balsa. "How old do you think I am?"

"Let's see... I thought you looked about twenty."

Yugno smiled a lonely smile. "I'll turn fifty two this year in the month of the chirping cicadas."

"What?!"

"The song of the Li, really does give you a very long life... Hearing that song just now probably extended your lifespan a bit as well."

Balsa remembered that boiling-like feeling, which made her body and soul tremble and slowly touched the nape of her neck. "If you don't watch out... If you let others know about this, you'll be done for. Of course the Galcinba are coming after you. You're like an elixir of immortality. No matter how extravagant a price would be put on you, the number of people who would want to get their hands on you is surely as large as the number of stars in the sky."

"Yes, I know that. I've been living carefully until now. I moved out from my home village. A man who still looked fifteen at thirty would stand out too much. I can't stay too long in one place. That's why as a travelling singer I've been singing normal songs for a living. But just once, I made a huge mistake. The result of which was this whole mess. Last autumn I met a Sangalese cloth merchant in an inn. This woman was a huge connoisseur, when she bought thread she had to see it with her own eyes to be satisfied, so she came to Yogo. She was very beautiful. I fell for her at first sight. I couldn't help it. At times like those you lose all common sense, don't you? I wanted to show her I wasn't just some worthless travelling entertainer."

Yugno smiled bitterly. "She was the first one I've told about this stuff since my family. She took my hand looking very moved and told me that she would be coming to Yogo to buy stuff again next early summer, so I should decide the date and we could meet at the same inn again. The day before yesterday was that agreed upon day, but as I waited at that inn, only a man claiming to be her servant approached me and treated me to some delicious wine..." After saying that, Yugno spoke no more, just stared at the ground vacantly.

"Maybe there's some reason for all of this. Maybe her business was failing and she desperately needed a large sum of money, and through tears was forced to sell you out."

Yugno looked up and smiled faintly. "That would be awful... But yeah, I want to think something like that too."

"Are the Li still close?"

"Yes. They're hanging around over here and there." Yugno pointed at the shadow of a magnolia tree and at a thicket near the edge of the lake. Balsa strained her eyes and looked, but she couldn't see anything out of the ususal.

"I can't see them. It's just since I've got some kind of bond with them, I always feel them. I can also hear them."

Balsa wasn’t convinced. "But, I can't sense them. And that's something I'm very confident in."

"It's probably because they feel similar to trees or grass."

Balsa suddenly remembered what happened to her that morning. Someone touched her hair and woke her up… "So that was the Li trying to save you..." Balsa whispered and looked up at Yugno. "Can the Li make you have dreams?"

"Who knows. They probably can. But I haven't thought about that before."

After saying that, thinking of something, Yugno's face lit up with a bright smile. "But you know, I can probably also make people have wonderful dreams."

"What do you mean...?"

When Balsa asked that question, Yugno's face became red and he waved his hand. "Well, that's... err. Please forget that."

"The more you say that, the more I wanna know."

But Yugno laughed and evaded the question. "Well, all bards have powers like that."

Looking at Yugno's face, which held the extremely pleased expression of a child hiding a secret, Balsa had a great idea. "Galcinba are pretty persistent, so it would probably be for the best if you grew your hair and beard out to change your appearance and hid somewhere far from others. I know of a well hidden house, so would you like to come with me?"

Yugno frowned a bit. "Well yes, that's just what I would have been looking for. Is this place yours?"

"No, it's my childhood friend's house, but I lived there from time to time since I was a child so it's kind of like my own house too. To be honest, I want you to meet the house's owner. He's called Tanda and he's an apprentice magic weaver, I'm sure he would be very happy to meet you."

For those interested:

1. Sangal in katakana is written □□□□.
2. Jocom in katakana is written □□□□.
3. Yugno in katakana is written □□□.
4. Li Tou Ruen in katakana is written □ □ □□□ □□□□. The Li are a type of Kodama (□□) in this book or spirits that you can read more about on their Wiki article: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kodama_(spirit)

Chapter 1 Part 2

Those who won't wake up

Tanda was taking the pulse of his niece, Kaya. He could feel the worried glances of his older brother's family clinging to his back.

Her sleeping face looked much younger than her fourteen years. She was covered with a crude blanket woven from a vine called *shiluya* and was sleeping very deeply. Her face was a bit too pale, but her breaths came easily and her pulse was well within the norm, though a bit slow.

"This has been going on since morning, you say?" Tanda asked, twisting his body to face the family. Nosil, Tanda’s brother and the father of the sleeping girl, nodded.

"Yes. Even if you shake her, hit her or anything, she won't wake up."

"She didn't hit her head hard or anything, right?" Tanda moved his gaze to the worried faces of his nephews and sister in law, but they all shook their heads.

"Until yesterday night she was the same as always. You know that she's a hard worker. She wakes up at dawn and works tirelessly each day..."

Tanda went back to looking at Kaya. He took her wrist and tried shaking her vigorously, but she kept on sleeping, breathing normally.

Kaya's sleeping face was striking. She was smiling faintly, and looked very happy. Tanda began to control his breathing while rubbing his hands

together. He murmured an incantation to sharpen his awareness. While checking her pulse with his right hand, he put his left hand on her forehead and then remained with his eyes closed for a while.

Once Tanda sighed and opened his eyes, Nosil whispered from behind. "How was it? She was cursed by someone, wasn't she?"

Tanda started to refute him with a 'that's not it', when he noticed Nosil abruptly standing up. He seemed to want Tanda to come over.

Nosil brought Tanda to the corner of the room and started whispering so that the children wouldn't hear. "Answer me as quietly as you can... Has Kaya been cursed?"

"There are no traces of a curse. I don't think there is any reason to be worried about that."

"What is it then? Some kind of disease or something?"

"I don't think it's an illness. Not one of the body at least."

Nosil narrowed his eyes. "What is it then?"

Tanda answered, though Nosil was almost glaring at him by then. "To be honest I have no idea why Kaya won't wake up. It doesn't seem like a disease and there are no traces of a curse. I know that much for now..."

Nosil snorted. "You're sure you can tell whether it's a curse or not, right?"

After speaking with such scorn, Nosil suddenly changed his expression. He remembered that his strange, and seemingly unreliable, younger brother was the hero who helped the crown prince to save the country from a great drought last year. He sheepishly changed his tune.

"I'm sorry. There is no way you'd be wrong about such a thing, right? I meant no offence. I just..."

Tanda answered calmly. "Anyway, I'm definitely sure it's not a curse. But as you say I'm still inexperienced as a magic weaver. Master Torogai is back right now, so I'll consult her. Then I'll know for certain what's going on."

Nosil scowled silently for a while, but eventually returned his gaze to Tanda. "I'm grateful for that. But even if you find the reason, tell the others her sickness is a curse."

Tanda looked at his brother. Nosil, seemingly irritated by Tanda's gaze, spoke in a subdued voice. "You know this too! After this autumn's crop she was supposed to be getting married. It will hurt her reputation less if others think this is a curse and not some strange disease."

Tanda shook his head slightly. "I understand that, but if a rumour that someone cursed her spreads, girls who don't like Kaya, or even completely innocent people might be suspected and suffer. I can't agree to this."

Nosil looked at Tanda with cold eyes. "We're talking about your niece here, about Kaya! You're not one of us villagers. You live in the mountains alongside souls and evil spirits and what not, so you probably don't get it, but just see what happens if you spread some weird rumours around here. That rumour will stick to the girl her whole life. Who do you think will suffer then? If that's what you're worried about, we can just blame the travelling performer who came to our village recently."

After whispering all of that in one breath, Nosil sunk slightly. "Tanda, how old are you? Since I'm thirty-eight you must be around twenty-nine. If so, then it's about time you had a cute daughter of your own. In the middle of the mountains there are no women... No matter how esteemed the magic weavers or travelling bodyguards are, hanging out with them makes you a brat in my eyes."

Tanda's lips formed a lonely smile. There was a deep chasm between himself and his well respected, honest farmer of a brother. So deep in fact that it couldn't be put into words.

Nosil sighed and put a hand on Tanda's shoulder. "Anyway you're a hero, so to speak, and people trust you. And we, your relatives, trust you as well. It's not like you're some suspicious travelling magic weaver. I think of you as someone I can rely on. I'm sorry for saying nasty things, but anyway, we leave Kaya in your care."

Tanda nodded. Returning to Kaya's side, he spoke to Nosil's wife, Naka. "Try to give Kaya something to drink three times a day. To not block up her throat, sit her up and carefully let her drink. If she can drink the water, dissolve some honey in lukewarm water and give her that next. And also keep her body as clean as you can."

After each sentence, the stocky Naka nodded. The time just after rice planting was busy, but the relatives would help out and everything should be fine.

Tanda was walking on a mountain path leading away from his brother's house and thinking. People who knew how he normally was would be surprised at the grimness of his expression. Tanda, with his baby face and his truly calm personality, usually had a carefree expression. Because of his pleasant demeanor, the people in the nearby villages respected him, and relied upon his knowledge as a herbalist.

But, true to his brother's hostile words, a herbalist or magic weaver was not a proper villager. Since they weren't farmers, they didn't have to pay taxes, but in turn during famine they would also not receive the rice distributed to save the farmers. They didn't live in the villages, weren't included in festivals and didn't marry other villagers. They were also sometimes feared as ones who spoke to spirits, sent souls to the afterlife, or who travelled through other worlds.

Tanda lived in the middle of nowhere, close to the Misty Blue Mountains. His usually-lonely house was roughly a *dan,* or an hour's walk, away from

New Yogo's capital, Kosenkyo.

New Yogo was founded two hundred years ago, by the ancestors of the current Yogoese. They hated their own kingdom of Yogo and crossed the wide sea to move to a green and plentiful land, the Nayoro Peninsula.

Before the Yogoese came here, the peninsula was inhabited by a people called the Yakoo. Unlike the Yogoese, the Yakoo had dark skin and eyes, and spent their days cultivating small fields, hunting wild animals and gathering various grass roots and fruits.

Many Yogoese farmers intermarried with the Yakoo, so these days most had tan skin, but ever since their arrival, the royal family, nobles and even merchants had avoided marrying Yakoo to keep their blood pure.

Tanda was also part Yakoo and part Yogoese. His skin was a dark brown as was his short hair. His dark eyes were filled with a soft light. His normally gentle face, with its low nose a part of its charm, was tight and grim-looking.

Tanda's house stood in a small meadow surrounded by mountains. It was just a single room really, with only a small well inside. Originally it was his master's house, but she had a habit of suddenly disappearing from time to time, so without really realising it at some point it became his.

When he opened the sliding door, the smell of warmed rice wine wafted up to meet him. An old lady was sitting in the middle of the room, stirring the contents of a clay pot suspended above a hole in the wooden floor which opened up onto the bare ground to allow for a hearth.

"What a smell! What are you cooking, master?"

The old lady lifted up her face. Her skin was very dark and wrinkled, her hair white and unkempt. Her eyes were thin slits, and her nose spread out across her face. It didn't take more than a moment to see that she was an unforgettably ugly old lady, but her eyes showed a tremendously strong

spirit.

This ugly old lady was Tanda's master, Torogai, rumoured to be the strongest magic weaver around these days. "I'm boiling chicken in some rice wine." After responding curtly, Torogai looked at Tanda and frowned. "What? What's with that strange expression?"

Tanda sat at the hole in the floor and explained in detail today's diagnosis of his niece's condition. "I thought it would only make him worry, so I didn't tell my brother this, but I think her soul isn't in her body right now."

"You tried using Soul Link, right?"

To perform a Soul Link, Tanda touched his niece's wrist with his right hand and her forehead with his left, trying to join their souls through touch. “Yes, she was alive, but I couldn't find her soul in her body."

Normally, a human body contains both life and a soul, bound with an invisible thread. When a human dies, this life settles in another creature's body and binds to its soul, forever continuing the circle of life. The soul is responsible for feelings, thoughts, and also dreams.

Generally, while dreaming, the soul does nothing more than create a jumbled mix of memories and desires, but sometimes it can leave the body and travel to another world. In such cases the dreams one sees are actually the reality of that other world.

When people die the thread that connects the life and the soul is severed. The soul is first drawn into the afterlife and only after it forgets everything about its previous life can it be reborn.

Once the thread is cut, only a soul with a grudge or strong feelings is left wandering the world and dwelling upon the memories of its life. Such souls are what people call ghosts.

Magic weavers such as Torogai could soothe such souls and knew

techniques to send them to the afterlife. Tanda had also dealt with countless souls while helping his teacher. That's why he could easily tell his niece's soul wasn't there during his earlier examination.

"Well, well... This can't be a coincidence." Torogai murmured while patting the back of her head. "You know that I went to see Shuga this morning, right?"

"Oh yes. That Star Reader from before, right?"

Star Readers were the learned men of this kingdom, who governed over matters of religion and scholarship from within their Star Palace. Shuga was the most successful young Star Reader, rumoured to even be a genius. He and Torogai became acquainted through a strange twist of fate and were now in the habit of exchanging knowledge from time to time.

"Yes. He wanted advice on a case exactly like your niece's."

"There are others who won't wake up?"

"You see, I've been told that the First Queen has been sleeping for two days already."

Tanda's face became the picture of surprise. The First Queen was the woman who gave birth to the Emperor's oldest son - the crown prince. A bit more than a year ago, though, she lost her beloved son, Sagum to an illness. It's been said that her sadness never lessened and so she exiled herself to the Royal Mountain Villa in mourning.

"Two whole days..." Tanda whispered. "Certainly, this doesn't seem like a coincidence. What could possibly be the cause?"

"In the case of the First Queen no one has any idea what could have caused this, but what about your niece? Your brother didn’t have a clue, right?"

"He didn’t. But I've just thought of something that might be relevant."

Torogai raised an eyebrow.

"I'm close to Kaya. We don't meet all that often but when we talk alone, she often speaks quite frankly. She tells her strange uncle things she wouldn't tell anyone else."

Tanda smiled wryly and continued. "Not too long ago, a young travelling entertainer came by to the village to sing and apparently he had a really good voice. Kaya is not one for drama. If anything she's a calm girl, but it would seem that she fell in love with this youngster at first sight. Of course, though, the love was one sided... He left for another village soon enough, and she couldn't follow him, so she settled for the dream-like state of being in love."

Tanda rubbed his chin in embarrassment. "But, the other day, her parents decided to wed her to a farmer from the next village over, eighteen years her senior... Apparently since then she's said nothing, and has been looking depressed the whole time. She's now at the age when people worry about many things, so I'm wondering if all these feelings didn't trigger something."

Just then, Tanda suddenly remembered something. "Also, when I was trying to touch Kaya's soul I could smell something nice. Something flowery. When someone is cursed, don't they smell like burnt *Dolga* root, since that's what is used in curses? Since Kaya didn't smell like that I decided it wasn't a curse. Or is there some way of cursing people with flowers that I don't know about?"

Torogai didn't respond. She was vacantly staring at the flames of the hearth, seeming as if her gaze was directed at a different time.

Tanda knew well that once Torogai got like this he wouldn't get an answer no matter what he tried, so he left her in peace and bent forwards to look into the clay pot. With practiced hand movements he began removing the skin, which had formed on the surface of the broth. He tasted it, scrunched his face, and added a bit of water.

Tanda added some green vegetables and potatoes and had them absorb the chicken broth’s flavour. Only once he brought it back to boil again did Torogai move. Tanda scooped some of the stew into a wooden bowl and passed it to Torogai.

She held the bowl as if she was only warming her hands with it, but eventually she hungrily drank the contents. It was early summer, but nights in the mountains were still cold. Hot stew containing some rice wine warmed up the whole body from the inside.

Torogai sipped on her *Ramon* leaf tea and mumbled a few words. "Maybe it's time for the Night of the Flower in the other world."

"Night of the Flower? What do you mean by the other world? Nayugu?"

The Yakoo knew of the existence of two worlds. One was the everyday world, that everyone could see, or Sagu. The other world they called Nayugu, and it was usually invisible. The Yogoese don't believe in this other world, but both Torogai and Tanda have looked upon the sights of Nayugu using their powers as magic weavers. They could even converse with the creatures that lived there.

"Tanda. I haven't told even you about this yet. I didn't want to tell you about it. To talk about this I have to tell you about my shitty, uninteresting past as well, you see."

Torogai was speaking as if she were looking for the right words and hesitating, nothing like her usual harsh way of spitting words out unreservedly. "You understand about Sagu and Nayugu well enough right? They overlap. With magic weaving techniques we can open our eyes to Nayugu… But Nayugu is a bit like a bottomless swamp, the deeper you go, the more it seems to go on forever. Shabby magic weavers are content with just seeing the shallow parts. And that's fine. For the shabby ones, the deeper parts are deadly."

Torogai exposed her teeth in a wide grin. "My master, Norugai, was one of those who went really deep. I think I've finally managed to get as deep in my old age. Tanda. As I've taught you Nayugu isn't the only other world out there. If worlds that overlap like Sagu and Nayugu exist, then there surely also exist worlds that move towards and then away from each other. Like bubbles underwater."

Torogai sighed. "Before I knew anything about magic weavers, I met someone in a mysterious world. That was soon after I lost a son."

Tanda looked at Torogai in mute amazement. "A son? You have given birth before?"

Torogai's expression looked as if she bit into something extremely sour as she glared at Tanda. "Is that what you think of me, you lout? I was young once upon a time too!"

"Oh. Oh, yes of course."

"I've given birth to three kids. Two sons and a daughter. But my village was a lot poorer than the ones here, the land was all dried up. So... all three of them died before they were four."

This was the first time Torogai told anything of her past to Tanda. And it was such a sad and mysterious tale.

For those interested:

1. Shiluya is written □□□ in katakana.
2. Dan is written □□ in katakana.
3. Soul Link is written □□□ (□□□□) in the book. The first two kanji mean one body/unity and the third one is diagnosis, so the actual name of this technique is something like One Body Diagnosis, but that doesn’t sound great… Suggestions other than Soul Link would be welcome.

4. Dolga is written □□□ in katakana.
5. Ramon is written □□□ in katakana.
6. Norugai is written □□□□ in katakana.
7. The hearth in this chapter is written like this: □□□, which I believe is a sunken hearth. If you're interested here's a Wikipedia article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irori (the Japanese article has a few more pictures if you're really curious)

Chapter 1 Part 3

The Flower's Keeper

“I was born in a small, Yakoo-only village. There aren't many of those left anymore. All the villagers were relatives, and according to Yakoo law you can’t marry each other even if you’re only distantly related, so marrying the Yogoese from a village downstream was common. I’m sure you can imagine, but I was a bit of a strange girl ever since I was born.”

Torogai looked at Tanda and grinned broadly. “Waking up at dawn, working all day, then sleeping. Getting married, having kids, getting old and dying. In this village where everyone thought this way of life was normal and no one ever considered anything else, I lived constantly thinking that there has to be some other way.

She looked away. “I liked listening to ballads sung by travelling singers during festivals because they gave me such wonderful dreams. Dreams of far-away countries that made my heart beat faster. Only, while I was stuck in that life, such dreams were sleeping deep inside, smouldering like a banked fire. Cause you see, when I turned fourteen I got married to a farmer I’d never even met before, from the village downstream.”

A harsh light was visible in Torogai’s eyes. “He was a terrible man. He worked hard, but that was it. He didn’t feel like being kind to his wife, and when the children were born he didn’t show them any special affection either. Because the village we lived in was much poorer than the ones here, women gave birth to roughly ten children, but only around four of those survived. At fifteen I also gave birth to a child, then later again and again. I gave birth to three. But all of them really died too quickly. My husband

wasn't particularly sad, his expression seemed to be saying ‘that’s just how it is’. He probably thought he could easily have a few more.”

Torogai looked at Tanda. “But I couldn’t think like that. For a while after losing a child, I thought I could hear its laughter. I thought I could feel it running around my feet as I walked. Starting around that time I slowly grew strange. I couldn’t overcome the sadness like other women could. The feelings that I kept deep inside, muted like a banked fire, became huge dazzling flames.”

She paused. “After losing my last child, I was called away by the mountains, you see.”

Tanda nodded slightly. Sometimes women did completely disappear after losing their children. Half a month later they would be found wandering around the mountains in torn up clothing. In those situations the villagers said that ‘that girl was called away by the mountains’.

Torogai continued. “If you stay in the village it feels like you can’t breathe. Only when picking wild grasses in the mountains, does your heart calm down. Soon enough, no matter what you’re doing, you end up looking in the direction of the mountains, and before you realise it, you’re standing right in the middle of them. Even though you don’t remember the climb. That day too, I was working in the fields when my head started hurting terribly and before I noticed, I was standing in the middle of the mountains. Usually, after resting in the shade of a grove for a while, I would come back down before my husband noticed I was gone, but that day I didn’t want to return to the village, no matter what.”

“What would I find if I went deep into the mountains like that? Deeper and deeper. I wouldn’t have even minded if I collapsed and died back then. It was about this time of year then too; breathing in the mountain air was like drowning in the smell of fresh leaves. I just kept walking into the blue light while tripping over roots and getting caught on bushes. By the time dawn broke there was nothing but mountains all around me and I stumbled upon the bank of a huge lake. It stretched out vastly amidst the blue darkness of

predawn. The white mist slowly slid across its glass-like, dark surface, not disturbed by even a single ripple."

"I think at this point I fell asleep, crouching by the bank. And I had a strange dream. In it, I was also sleeping by the bank. When I lied down a wind that felt indescribably good started blowing and I felt as if it were stroking me. I felt as if my dead child were calling me, so I panicked and woke myself up. When I opened my eyes I could see something suspended between the surface and the bottom of the lake."

"What was it?" Tanda hurried Torogai on.

"A huge royal palace. Upside-down. Almost as if it was just a reflection of something which stood towering on the opposite shore. But there was nothing on the other shore, I saw it only in the middle of the lake. At that time I hadn't even seen a royal palace before, but I really liked the ballads those travelling performers sung. I especially liked one about the nobles of an ancient, prosperous country that are to this day still dreaming about the good old times at their big royal palace. When I was little I liked making up stories before going to sleep. Out of those, I liked the one with those nobles and stories about falling in love best."

"When the wind and rain were blowing into our awfully shabby hut, where we didn't have *shiluya* bedding or any bedding at all, and we slept on the dirt floor covered in ashes for warmth, I would have such dreams. In the light of day I was an ugly, poor girl, but in my dreams I would become one of those nobles. After I got married, I forgot even those dreams."

"But that time, deep in the lake I saw that huge royal palace I used to dream about. I can still clearly imagine its ornate roof made of plain wood. It was riddled with countless passages and a giant gate stood towering over it all, facing the depths of the lake."

"From that gate a shadow appeared, and walked towards me. It was a tall youth. He wore long gray robes I've never seen the likes of before, tied with a deep green sash. And very much like in a dream, the youth was not

surprised to see me. He said something like ‘It’s cold isn’t it?’ to me. I replied with a ‘yes it is’.”

“He lit a bonfire on the pebbled shore. We had a pleasant conversation by the fire. I don’t really remember what we talked about anymore. There were a few things I can’t forget though. He said he was the Flower's Keeper. And that the Flower in question is one that blooms by using dreams as nourishment.”

“He also said these exact words:

> ‘A man named Rosetta died today. He was a good host for the Flower’s seed. He travelled to many lands to sing ballads and he touched many people’s dreams in his life. His soul was always full of dreams, which meant abundant nourishment for the bud to sprout, which is why he was the best kind of host.
>
> ‘In his last moments he dreamt of the seed’s sprouting… and this world was born. Yes, the Flower is this world itself. When the seed sprouts, this world is born and when the Flower withers, this world disappears. But if the Flower bears a seed, and the bud can grow in a good host’s soul, it will sprout, and like now, this world will be born anew.’
>
> ‘I’ve been guarding the Flower ever since I was born as the seed sprouted, you see. My duty is to help the flower grow, and to ensure that the soul that will become the seed’s next host is reborn into a new life.’ ”

“The youth stood and offered me his hand. I took it. My body felt as if it were lightly floating up. It felt amazing. He led me to the upside-down palace in the lake as if we were gliding. The lake was incredibly blue, but there was no water. It was all just blue light. I thought it was like the blue of dawn. The blue just before the sun rises.”

“There was no one at all in the palace. The building was very quiet. When I looked up, I could see a roof made of plain wood far above. I remember

seeing the light moving there in the same way ripples do on the water's surface. I stepped down into a huge garden surrounded by white clay walls. There were many thick trees there that I didn't recognise. Perhaps rather than a garden it was more like a meadow surrounded by mountains. In the middle of it there was a spring with unbelievably clear water, and at its bottom a sprout was growing from amongst the white sand."

Torogai crossed her legs and rested her chin in her hands before looking at Tanda. "I mostly don't remember what I did there or even how long I stayed. I only remember that I was very happy, just loving the Flower's Keeper. I loved him with an intensity I had never felt before. And so I got pregnant and gave birth to a child. I think it was a boy."

With a gentle noise, some charcoal fell to pieces, having burnt out. "The Flower's Keeper cradled the child in his arms and said:

> 'This child is a soul born of you and me. A bridge between our worlds. Even after he is brought to your world, he will visit here every night in his dreams. In these lovely dreams, he will help the flower mature. And when the flower reaches full bloom, he will call over pollinating dreams. Eventually he will accept the new seeds, and traverse your world as the new host.' "

" 'Like Rosetta did before?' I asked. He nodded then responded:

> 'Yes. This child's soul was once called Rosetta. But now he is our child. His life will proceed on a different path.' "

"I was mystified. Why would the Flower's Keeper fall in love with an ugly woman like myself? When I asked him though, he pulled a surprised face.

> 'Ugly? Nothing of the sort. You're strong and beautiful. While wounded and dreaming of death, you were shining so brightly. Me - the Flower's Keeper - and you with your strong and beautiful soul. Could there possibly be any parents more suitable for the Flower's host?' "

The fire made complicated shadows dance on Torogai's face. "Having said that the Flower's Keeper told me about the Night of the Flower.

> 'In the next few decades the seedling in that garden will grow and sprout many petals. When it reaches full bloom, the Night of the Flower will come. On that night, Dreams that will allow the Flower to be pollinated will be invited from your world. The first Dream to arrive will pollinate the Flower, but for the seeds to appear lots of Dreams will need to dwell in the petals and dream. As thanks, the Flower will give them only nice dreams. Eventually, when the seeds appear, a wind will start blowing. A wind that will connect your world with this one and scatter the Flower's petals.' "

"As soon as he said that, I felt like the wind was blowing especially noisily, as if it were showing off. When I asked what happens to the invited Dreams, the Flower's Keeper looked me in the eyes and responded.

> 'The wind will take them back… if they wish to go.' "

Torogai looked up at Tanda. "The Flower's Keeper didn't say any more on the topic, but I understood painfully well what he meant. I didn't want to go. Even if I died right there and then, I didn't want to return to that village. When I stumbled into the world of the Flower, I must have been drawn there by death itself. For animals, the feeling of wanting to survive is usually the strongest feeling. But I wonder why, sometimes, people feel irresistibly drawn to death."

"The Flower's world… was filled with the smell of fresh life drenched in morning dew, like that of a growing bud, but a smell of death similar to the silence just before dawn was also hanging in the air. It felt like life and death were right next to each other, separated only by a thin film, like a layer of foam reflected on the surface of the water."

Tanda asked for confirmation. "But if you only wished to live, you could easily return right?"

"Probably"

Relieved, Tanda drew in a breath he'd been holding. "Then she'll definitely return. Kaya wasn't in utter despair like you were back then. Since you returned despite that, Kaya will definitely be fine. Right, master?"

Torogai didn't answer.

"Master?"

"Yeah. Kaya is gonna be fine, but in my case…" Torogai's lips twisted in a bitter smile. "The Flower's Keeper said I was strong. He chose me to be the host's mother precisely because he saw in me the strength to come back from that dream and keep on living. But to this day, I have doubts. If I were alone, would I have been able to come back?"

Tanda didn't understand. "Huh?"

"At that time, there was someone who pulled me back to this world. While I was talking to the Flower's Keeper, a faintly shining bird came flying in. It was clad in wind as cold as a snowy morning. When it landed next to me, it transformed into a tall, thin, middle aged woman. She spun, looking at the surroundings, then looked down at me. While raising her eyebrows, she said:

> 'Well, isn't this quite the beautiful dream.' "

"I was having a very pleasant dream, and pointing that out was like being suddenly doused with cold water. I was annoyed. When she noticed my expression she raised her hands.

> 'Stop that! You can't get mad. If you get mad, a monster might appear.' "

"I had no clue what she was saying. I was just angry. So angry! So I screamed at her to get out of here. I was scared. What if, because of her disturbance, the dream ended and I woke up? So I desperately tried chasing her out of there. Leave quietly. Don't destroy this precious dream! I realised then just how deeply absorbed in the dream I was."

“She leaned in and put her hand on my shoulder. Her eyes were filled with a surprisingly deep light. They were the most beautiful eyes I’d ever seen. She placed both of her hands around my cheeks and said:

> ‘It would seem some meddling is in order. It will surely be painful, but you have to wake up soon. This place is too close to the afterlife. If you stay here like this, the body you left behind will weaken and eventually die.’ ”

“I tried getting away from her hands. I didn’t want to go back. I thought dying in the Flower’s dream with the youth I loved was much better than going back to that life. But she held me tightly and didn’t let go. Putting her heart into each and every word, she said:

> ‘You’re much stronger than you think. I know this. If you’re prepared to die, then you’re prepared to throw away everything, and you will be able to live a different life. Not one filled with such love, but one filled with unexpected joy. There is still so much you don’t know about our world!’ ”

Torogai snorted abruptly. “It felt as if my face was hit by a sudden blast of cold wind. I felt a throbbing power deep in my body. The feelings of not wanting to die finally rose up within me. When I turned around, the Flower’s Keeper was smiling a lonely smile.

> ‘It seems it’s time for you to go back. Take hold of our son’s soul and take it with you. If you do that, he will be born as someone’s child in your world.’ ”

“When he handed our son to me I felt indescribably sad. I started thinking that maybe he was just desperate for this soul to be born and taken to the world of men. But he started lightly stroking my hair and said:

> ‘Tomca, don’t pull such a sad face. Our bond won’t disappear. We will definitely meet again.’ ”

Torogai heaved a long sigh. “When I woke up, I was lying in the grass by the shore. It was dawn, but the sun had only just started to rise. I panicked and

stood up looking for traces of the bonfire, but of course, there weren't any. You understand, right? I knew it was a dream. But I also felt that it wasn't a normal dream. That's why I wasn't in the least surprised when a tall middle-aged woman appeared from among the reeds and smiled at me."

"When she pointed at my chest I felt a sharp pain. A light that looked similar to a firefly flew away from me and just when I thought it was going to keep rising into the sky forever, it crossed over the mountains and disappeared. The woman asked:

> 'Did you see that light just now?' "

"I nodded despite feeling a throbbing loneliness in my chest. When I did, she spoke with satisfaction:

> 'As I thought, you have potential. Potential to become a great magic weaver.' "

"I asked her if that light was my son's soul and she nodded.

> 'Yes. That was the light of a soul. Though, to be honest this is the first time I've seen something like this too, so I can't be sure. Speaking of things I've seen for the first time, that dream was really strange wasn't it? I managed to follow your soul to a place that must have been somewhere in Nayugu, but your dream and that world were affecting each other strangely.'
>
> 'Also, it was a hard world to get out of. It was almost like the depths of a whirlpool. If I messed up, I would have been trapped in there as well. Judging from the atmosphere in there it was high time to return you. We managed to come back somehow, but…' "

Torogai smiled wryly. "At the time I didn't understand what she was saying at all. I was a lot more worried about what happened to my son's soul, you see. I shook her and shouted 'what did you do to my son's soul? Where did you send it?' She only raised both her hands, and spoke soothingly.

> ‘I didn’t do anything. I only pointed at the soul you were clutching to your chest. That soul flew off all by itself. By now it’s probably inside the round belly of some woman living past the mountains.’ ”

When I heard that the soul I gave birth to was going to be some other woman’s child, I was surprised, or maybe pissed off, or both. I stood there seething when she placed a hand on my shoulder and said:

> ‘Please don't be so mad. After all it wasn’t your mother that made your soul either. Someone’s soul went to the afterlife and after forgetting everything about their previous life, it entered your mother’s belly and was later born as her child. That’s the order of this world. But I suppose your son’s fate will not be that of an ordinary person.’ ”

“After that she looked at me with startlingly kind eyes and said:

> ‘Souls in this world are linked by mysterious threads. A day when you meet him might come. Look forward to it.’ ”

After looking at Tanda, Torogai smiled faintly. “She was the great magic weaver, Norugai, my master. On that night she was sleeping in the mountains. She apparently noticed me wandering in the middle of the night, without any light and with a dreadful expression on my face, and quietly followed me.”

“Soon after I fell asleep, she apparently felt the same wind that invited me to the other world. She also said she saw countless souls gathering above the lake. She tried sending her soul to the world this wind was coming from. She saw the upside-down palace in the lake and thought that it must have been brought by the wind she felt earlier, but even though she could see it, she couldn’t reach it no matter how hard she tried.”

“Eventually she saw a youth exuding a mysterious light come to my side at the edge of the lake. She then saw us disappearing into the palace. She was about to give up and leave, until she saw all the other souls that had been invited here disappear into the wooden palace after us, and she was worried about what would happen to me.”

“Entering other worlds is very dangerous. Apparently she was very hesitant, but when the sun started rising she made up her mind and followed the thread that joined my body to my soul into the Flower’s world. The dream was long enough for me to give birth to a child, but in this world it was only long enough for the sun to fully rise.”

“Under the light of the morning sun, I listened to a story that once again sounded like a dream. I kind of felt as if I had been reborn. I haven’t returned to my husband’s village even once since then. I threw away the name Tomca, followed Norugai over the mountains, learnt magic weaving from her and became the magic weaver Torogai. This was over fifty years ago now.”

Tanda looked at Torogai. “The Flower’s Keeper, huh. I wonder if he did manage to protect the flower, and its time for pollination has now come?”

Torogai scratched the back of her ear. “Who knows. But you said that when you were examining your niece there was a flowery smell, didn’t you? That’s why I remembered this dream. Either way, to wake Kaya up we should try the Soul Call.”

Tanda breathed out.

Amongst the magic weavers there were some who didn’t always have good intentions. They have been known to curse people in exchange for money. Torogai and Tanda have performed the Soul Call to save such cursed individuals, whose souls have been drawn out of their bodies. The technique involved letting one’s soul leave their body and chasing after the other person’s soul. It was very dangerous.

Torogai stared at her favourite pupil. “And that’s not as easy as it sounds. Even to my master, Norugai, the Flower’s world was a strange land. She said it was easy to enter, but hard to leave. Like the depths of a whirlpool. Also going by what I’ve experienced, people might be perfectly happy to dream those dreams. Do you understand? This sleep captures people with dreams that feel irresistibly good. The souls sleeping there might not make it back. They might not want to come back. If it is the Night of the Flower right now,

that world is at its peak. This is the time it's strongest. Trying to sneak even a single soul in there and bringing out a soul that's dreaming is very dangerous. If you get stuck, you might never be able to leave. I'm saying this so that you understand."

Tanda nodded. "Maybe it's better to wait for Kaya to wake up naturally, but if she dies while I'm standing by and doing nothing out of fear for my own safety, I wouldn't be able to take it. I'm thinking of doing it in a few days."

Torogai snorted. "Sometimes you remind me of Balsa. If you think you've gotta do something, your own well-being becomes secondary, but…"

Torogai's eyes were filled with a stern light. "But there is one big difference between you two. Have you noticed? She's a very lonely person and defines her life as what she has achieved thus far. She doesn't dream of the future, so when she risks her life her resolve is stronger. But you're not like that. You have plans for the future. You look forward to it, right? So when you risk your life it's because you believe there is no other way."

Tanda was not pleased to hear this. "That's why when it's do or die, you think I won't be able to give my all?"

"No." Torogai smiled. "You're probably the kind of guy who would die for his beliefs. You're that kind of idiot. But that's no good, is it? Dying while thinking of the future you might have had. I don't want such a death for you."

Tanda wrinkled his nose, smiling wryly. "Stop that. You're gonna jinx me."

Torogai put her teacup down and stretched out her hands to reach for the bedding that has been warming up next to the hearth. "Anyway, we'll go check on your niece tomorrow. We can decide whether you're gonna do the Soul Call after that."

While Torogai was telling Tanda of her dream, Balsa and Yugno were camping out in the mountains. It was a windy night, but as they were both

used to travelling, they made sure to find a sheltered spot and light a bonfire.

Yugno knew plenty of ballads, being a travelling performer, so he made for a fun companion. He sang in a quiet voice, almost a whisper, to not let his voice carry far into the night, but that only gave his ballads flavour. After hearing a legend of a long-destroyed country, Balsa was deeply moved.

“Who taught you ballads like those? Did you have a master or something?”

After drinking from a bamboo flask to sate his thirst, Yugno wiped his lips. “There are many who do it that way, but not me. While on the road, I learned songs from other travelling performers. We swapped ballads. If you go towards the borders, you get to meet bards from not just Yogo, but Kanbal and Sangal as well. Though not to the extent of one such as yourself, we bards understand about three languages too.”

Balsa nodded. “I see. I’ve also met quite a few travelling performers, and they did indeed all speak about three languages.”

Yugno stuffed his face with a fruit filled *mochi* cake made out of pounded sticky rice, that he had warmed up over a fire on a sharpened stick. He wiped his hands on his knees and scratched his light stubble. “When you do it like me and compare ballads, you get to know interesting things. For example, that far-apart countries often have similar legends.”

Yugno looked up at the night sky. The wind was making the clouds drift by, sometimes hiding the thin moon, sometimes letting it shine down. “I sometimes think that ballads are like flower seeds that the wind carries across far distances, like dandelions. Ballads, just like those seeds, also fly through the sky to faraway lands and make new flowers bloom there.”

Balsa smiled faintly. “That would make you the wind that carries the seeds, wouldn’t it?”

“Precisely.” Yugno laughed cheerfully, then suddenly looked at Balsa as if he had thought of something. “You see, I don’t only make the flowers bloom in different lands. I also overcome social standing while making them bloom.

‘Yugno the Bard’ is pretty famous, I’ll have you know! Only a week ago I was singing to comfort the First Queen; that’s how famous I am!”

Balsa, surprised, stared at Yugno intently. “I thought this country’s royal family would never interact with commoners!”

“It’s different for us travelling bards and dancers. We exist outside ourselves. The songs of travelling bards are said to carry the power of good luck and happiness.”

“I see. That’s why they call for you for the new year and for festivals.”

“Yes. This is just between us, but for close to a year now the First Queen has locked herself up in the Mountain Royal Villa after she lost the Crown Prince to an illness. So, they arranged a feast to console her and invited me over to distract her with some ballads. And what a feast it was! Not only were nobles there, but also Star Readers and even the new Crown Prince. What a gathering! Singing for a crowd of such high status, was the first and surely last event of its kind in my life.”

When Balsa heard of the new Crown Prince, she felt a sudden pain in her chest. The face of the boy she met through a strange twist of fate, then had to part with, flashed through her mind. This boy - Chagum - was the Second Prince at that time, but because he had become the host for a spirit’s egg, he was almost assassinated on the orders of the Mikado, his father and divine ruler of New Yogo. He remained a fugitive with Balsa and Tanda for over half a year.

After overcoming countless trials last summer, Chagum returned to the Royal Palace. He was named the Crown Prince then, since the First Queen’s son, Sagum, had died. He will have to eventually bear the burden of being the Mikado.

If Sagum hadn’t died, would Chagum still be with me now?

Such thoughts sometimes passed through Balsa’s head and pained her. Yugno didn’t notice the effect his words were having on Balsa and was still talking. “Of course when I say I sang at the Mountain Royal Villa, I mean I

was standing in the inner courtyard and the First Queen was deep inside behind a bamboo screen. I didn't even see her shadow."

Yugno chuckled and turned to look at Balsa. "Should I sing the song I sang there?"

Balsa woke from her deep thoughts and nodded. Yugno began to sing happily.

It was a love song. Despite being gentle and bright, the song felt melancholy and heart-rending. Just listening to it was painful. She could see Chagum's face when she closed her eyes. She could see the sorrowful expression he wore when they were about to part, and her chest began to hurt all over again. What if she were his real mother? If she were born to such a fate, she would probably have lived a better, happier life. The feelings of something she wanted, but couldn't have, overlapped with the song and swirled in her heart.

When the song finally finished, Balsa sucked in a gulp of air and noticed that she was trying to erase the final lingering notes from her heart. She wanted to fill the wide open vacant hole in her chest as fast as possible. She wiped her face with her sweaty hands and stared at Yugno. He noticed her stare and raised his eyebrows. "What's wrong? Did you not like it?"

"No. I don't know. It was a very beautiful song, but…"

Balsa paused looking for the right words. "How do I say this… It was a song that makes you really miss things you've lost. I felt the pain of yearning for something that I can't have ever again. Wasn't this a cruel choice of song for a Queen who had lost her son?"

Yugno asked in surprise. "Cruel?"

"Yes. This song must have made her think about her son. And it's not like he's gonna come back. Making her think back on the times that are gone was cruel."

Yugno tilted his head in a bird like fashion. “Is that so? I think letting her experience the happiness she once felt, even just this once, would make her feel better. I’ve actually been singing this song here and there this past spring, and everyone liked it, sometimes enough to cry. Surely she’s thankful that she heard it, now.”

After saying that Yugno smiled widely and his face shone with a bottomless brightness. Balsa lost all will to object. “Interesting. Then it must be a good song. I’m ignorant when it comes to elegant things, so it must have just not suited me personally.”

Yugno, like a true entertainer, sung a bright song to cheer Balsa up, without so much as showing a sliver of displeasure. But the heart wrenching echo still resounding deep in her chest wasn’t so easy to vanquish.

For those interested:

1. Tomca is written □□□ in katakana.
2. Soul Call is written □□□□ (□□□□□) where the first kanji means soul and the second means call. I don’t know the conjugation □□□ so I might be missing some meaning here. As always if you’ve got any ideas let me know.
3. Mikado (□) just means emperor in Japanese, but for some reason the first two books kept the Japanese word untranslated. I don’t particularly like this, but here you go. This is especially jarring to me because they don’t keep Kisaki (□) and use Queen instead. They’re essentially mixing the eastern and western royal terminology with this emperor, queen bullshit.

Chapter 1 Part 4

A room without an exit

The rumours of the First Queen's strange illness spread quietly but quickly through the Ogi no Kami district.

New Yogo's capital, Kosenkyo, was situated in a delta between two rivers, Aoyumi and Torinaki. If compared to an unfolded fan, the handle, or the most Northern part was where the Emperor's Palace was. To its South-East, the First through Third Queens lived in Ichinomiya, Ninomiya, and Sannomiya Palaces, respectively. These four Palaces together were formally called Yogonomiya, but the people became accustomed to calling the area the Ogi no Kami district.

In between the Emperor's Ogi no Kami district to the North and the nobles' Ogi no Naka district to the South, was the centre of religion and scholarship - the Star Palace. At the very bottom of the fan, or the farthest South, was the Ogi no Shimo district inhabited by the commoners.

The Queen that gave birth to the Emperor's first son, or the Crown Prince, was called the First Queen in this Kingdom. However, slightly over a year ago, the First Queen lost her beloved son, Crown Prince Sagum, to an illness. In her undiminishing sorrow she had taken to residing in the Mountain Royal Villa ever since. For the past seven days, though, she had not woken.

In this Kingdom, it was said that if a commoner even just looked into the eyes of a member of the royal family they would go blind. The royal family were god's descendants, and some of his power dwelled within their eyes. Those with such power could subconsciously pull others along, just as a

water current, invisible from the surface, can pull one deep down. It was believed that if this power was directed at those who couldn't withstand it, they would end up being hurt. Because of this belief, the news of a member of the royal family falling ill filled everyone with unrest. It could only mean that the god protecting this Kingdom was growing weaker.

But to a boy studying as hard as he could, in a room deep inside Ninomiya Palace, this was also an incident giving temporary respite from the boredom of everyday life. This boy was the new Crown Prince, Chagum. At his thirteen years of age it was already clear that he inherited his stern eyebrows and nose from his father, the Mikado, but his lively black eyes were just like those of his mother, the Second Queen.

Chagum became the Crown Prince after his half-brother Sagum died, but to him this was definitely not something to be happy about. This fragile boy couldn’t shake the feeling that the position of Crown Prince, the future Mikado himself, was nothing short of a curse.

In front of him, on a big desk, there was a stellar map drawn on very thin cloth overlaid on top of a map of New Yogo. The waning noon sun spilled into his third floor room through a window opened wide. Below it there was a deep and wide moat, so the only sounds Chagum could hear were the cries of birds and the murmur of trees swaying in the wind.

This silence was only disturbed by the conversation between Chagum and the young Star Reader in charge of his education.

“You say that Tendo has been around for over a thousand years, even as far back as the times of the Old Yorsa Kingdom founded on the continent by my ancestors. But does that mean it remained unchanged all that time?”

The Star Reader answered Chagum’s question with a quiet but easily heard voice. “Tendo, the belief that our Yogoese god, Ten no Kami, leads this world has remained utterly unchanged in the past thousand years. The root remains the same. However, how Tendo is understood, or the art of its interpretation has been improved upon and put into the context of our ever growing knowledge.”

“For example, Kainan Nanai, the Master Star Reader who led our ancestors to this beautifully green Nayoro Peninsula from the continent’s Yogo Kingdom and was instrumental in the founding of New Yogo, also established the Star Reader institution. Up till that point, the one to inherit governance over Tendo was usually a man from one of four specific families. Nanai, though, gathered smart youths, regardless of their status, from all over the country and had them participate in the Trial of the Stars to test their aptitude. Raising these boys brought a breath of fresh air to Tendo.”

“It was also Nanai who instated the rule that once a youth completed the Star Reader apprenticeship, and was judged to possess great wisdom and a true heart, he could become the top-ranked Star Reader regardless of whether he was a commoner or a noble.” The young Star Reader smiled. “If he hadn't appeared, a poor fisherman’s son like me would probably have been rowing a boat right now.”

Chagum chuckled. “You’re enough of a genius that people call you the second coming of Nanai, and you're brave. If it was Nanai that gave people like you a chance to reform the country then he must have been a great person indeed.” After saying that Chagum switched to a darker tone of voice. “If only the Mikado could learn from Nanai’s example and would choose his successor based on talent from the general population, without considering their status.”

The Star Reader’s face clouded over. “Your Highness.”

“Don’t worry, Shuga. I only say what I truly think when I’m alone with you.”

The Star Reader called Shuga motioned for Chagum to keep his voice down. He knew of the Crown Prince’s feelings painfully well. He knew that throughout the history of the royal family, which has continued for more than a thousand years, this Crown Prince’s experiences were most likely the strangest.

One and a half years ago, when Chagum was still only the Second Prince, a Nyunga Ro Im laid an egg within his body. This creature was a water spirit which dwells in Nayugu, a separate and invisible world which overlaps with the visible world called Sagu.

When the Mikado found out that the Crown Prince, who should have been descended from god, was host to a native spirit, he tried to have Chagum, his own son, assassinated.

By chance, a wandering female bodyguard called Balsa, saved Chagum from assassination and together with her herbalist friend Tanda and the magic weaver Torogai, she helped Chagum overcome his hardships. Shuga was yet another person who helped Chagum during that time. Despite being only twenty at the time of this incident, Shuga became the right-hand man of the Master Star Reader. Using the influence this granted him, he found out about the darkest and dirtiest parts of governance in Ogi no Kami.

Through this incident Shuga also got to know the magic weaver Torogai, who introduced him to a different way of seeing the world as well as knowledge he had no inkling of before.

Despite being on the way up, with the expectation of one day becoming the Master Star Reader himself, Shuga harboured deep doubts in his heart.

So as to not be overheard by anyone, Shuga lowered his voice to a whisper. “I understand how you feel, your Highness. You must feel that this Palace is in its entirety nothing more than a dark, musty box. That’s why you want to flip that box on its head. Throwing everything into chaos and injecting a

breath of fresh air into a system does excite the heart, and there are absolutely times when such actions are necessary."

"However, your Highness, please suppress your emotions. Master Star Reader Nanai's Great Reform did indeed guide the Star Palace in the right direction, but organisations are such that once you give them shape, strife inevitably starts brewing inside. And thus our box, which we just freshened up, would begin to stagnate again."

Chagum cut in impatiently. "If it stagnates, we just need to ventilate it again!"

Shuga smiled wryly. "Your Highness, please don't speak with such openness in front of anyone else. Frankness is not particularly welcome in a Crown Prince."

Chagum scowled with dissatisfaction, but Shuga continued. "I've been hearing some rumours here and there. Your Highness, you found fault with the longsword the Mikado chose the other day, didn't you?"

"I didn't 'find fault' with it. Father was asking for my opinion. I only told him what I thought."

The Mikado liked beautiful longswords and so he had collected many. In fact, the other day a famous sword seller with an ornately decorated sword came to visit the Mikado. The sword was brought before the Mikado as he converessd with Chagum about the progress of his studies.

It was truly a beautiful sword. Both the pommel and the sheath were lacquered and inlaid with gold and mother of pearl. But when the Mikado unsheathed it and asked what Chagum thought of it, the boy felt only disappointment. He conveyed his honest feelings to the Mikado. "As an ornamental treasure, I think it's wonderful. However, as a sword meant to stab people, a flat blade without a groove such as this one would not stand up to the trials of war. The blade would be held fast by a stab wound due to the pressure of the blood around it and it would become impossible to pull out."

The Mikado nodded with understanding, but Chagum noticed that his father's face fell.

"Why did father seem displeased? After all, people will look down on him for buying swords like that."

Shuga observed Chagum for a while. "Your Highness, the Mikado is not human. If it came to the Mikado himself having to grasp a sword and fight with it, that would mean this country had fallen. The Mikado doesn't need to know about real swords. It's the job of one of his assigned military advisers to give counsel to the Mikado on such topics."

He continued after a pause. "It is precisely because the Mikado's soul is as pure as white cotton, unlike the souls of the commoners, that they can acknowledge him as the soul of the country itself. Because a Mikado like that can exist, we can be proud of our country and its purity. The Mikado should not easily be able to speak of such bloody things as killing people."

Chagum's eyes filled with a harsh light. "Even if behind that 'purity', he's thinking of such bloody things as killing his own son? Not to mention putting those thoughts into practice."

"Yes. As long as these thoughts don't show."

Chagum didn't speak for a while, thinking upon the meaning of those words. Eventually he rubbed his neck and spoke. "I understand well what you speak of. However, I do not wish to become a Mikado who would do such things. Or to be more precise, I probably cannot be like that. I did live amongst the commoners once, after all. This country to me is the messy gathering of all of those people. I cannot help that. I cannot share in this dream that father and all the Mikado before him had. I cannot pretend that I don't know anything about life outside the Palace, nor would I want to."

Shuga could feel the risk posed by the sharp intellect and propensity to think of others that this Crown Prince displayed. These traits could very well become a weakness that would destroy him when the time came for him to rule as the Mikado. However, if he managed to turn that weakness into a weapon, one day he would change this country as Nanai once did.

Shuga spoke quietly. “Even if you can’t live that way, you must. Until you have enough power and knowledge to support this country, you have no choice. Even more so if you intend to turn everything on its head. I do believe that such a day will come though.”

Those words struck Chagum straight in the heart. He sighed and then smiled. “You have complete mastery over finding ways to scold me. However, I will keep your words in mind.”

The wind blowing in through the window brought with it the scent of *suraya* flowers in full bloom. Chagum breathed it in deeply. “Isn’t it strange how smells can remind you of things so vividly? When I smell *suraya* flowers I’m reminded of the villa in the mountains. There was a big old *suraya* tree in the courtyard there…”

Having said that Chagum abruptly turned to look at Shuga. “Speaking of which, I’ve heard that this morning some news of the First Queen’s sickness was brought from the villa.”

Shuga sighed. “Your Highness. It is not yet time for idle chatter.”

Chagum smiled. “Don’t be such a bore. At least let me relax while talking to you. Please, tell me what is really going on with the First Queen.”

Shuga hesitated, but did eventually start speaking. “It would seem that the First Queen has not woken from her sleep at all in the past seven days.”

Chagum leaned forward. “Such a disease exists? Or is it some kind of curse?”

“I’ve heard of a ‘sleeping sickness’ before. The First Queen bears a deep wound in her heart that won’t heal, deep enough that she locked herself away in the mountain villa, so maybe she is still asleep due to such a sickness of the heart. But…” Here, Shuga lowered his voice. “And I tell you this in absolute confidence, but it seems that the First Queen is not the only one to sleep without waking.”

“What?”

“Your Highness, can I ask you to swear to never tell anyone of what I’m about to say?”

Chagum stared at Shuga. “I swear.”

Shuga started whispering as quietly as he could. “In truth, I’ve been going to see Torogai in Ogi no Shimo about once a month.”

Chagum’s eyes became as wide as saucers. “Really?!”

“Yes. Due to that incident from a year ago, I’ve exchanged a vow with Torogai. In return for teaching her about Tendo, she tells me of Yakoo magic weaving. Of course, if the Star Palace found out about this, I would be expelled, and many would rejoice.”

Shuga’s face split into a broad grin. “In summary, this is a truly sneaky exchange of wisdom.”

As he was saying that, he suddenly thought that he was in this together with Chagum. Both of them were in similar danger.

Chagum grabbed Shuga’s hand and impatiently started asking questions. “How is Torogai? Is her tongue as sharp as always?”

“Yes. She’s much too lively for a lady of more than seventy years.”

“What about Balsa? Is Tanda alright as well?”

“She hasn’t seen Balsa in a while, but Tanda is also well.”

Chagum panicked when he felt his eyes tearing up and quickly closed them. Shuga, understanding the boy’s feelings, continued speaking calmly. “I only met with Torogai the day before yesterday and we talked about some interesting things. In a village in the middle of the Misty Blue Mountains there is another woman who, just like the First Queen, won’t wake up. Since it would be bad if this kept spreading farther and farther I’m thinking of meeting with Torogai again, as soon as possible, to discuss this.”

Chagum opened his eyes and looked up at Shuga for a while. “Shuga. Please. Will you keep telling me about what happens to them?”

Shuga understood Chagum’s feelings so well it hurt. He suddenly felt a deep sense of regret in his chest.

This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have told the Crown Prince about this.

Chagum felt that this life, the life of a Crown Prince, was akin to being locked up in a room with no exit or even windows. Just then though, Shuga opened a window that allowed him to see a bit of the outside world. But no matter how long he gazed through it, there would never be a door that led outside.

On the night following his conversation with Shuga, Chagum couldn’t quite get to sleep. Memories kept on flashing before his eyes: Balsa’s spear stance; those warm, dry and sturdy hands; a pleasant, deep voice; Balsa, in the small cave hidden amongst the snow-buried mountains, talking about her sad past; Tanda’s cheerful voice; tasty vegetable hot-pot; those nostalgic days of living with Balsa, Tanda and Torogai in that crude house where the cold air came in through the countless gaps in the walls.

I wonder if anything happened between Balsa and Tanda? Did he manage to tell her? But Torogai said she hadn’t seen Balsa in a while, so maybe she’s off being someone’s bodyguard in a far away place again.

Chagum smiled.

Even I, a little child, could tell how drawn to each other they were. Why are they so awkward?

His smile suddenly twisted and tears fell down his cheeks.

I want to see them again!

Every time he thought of how he would never again see these people he once called family, his chest hurt as if it were about to split in two. In the past year these feelings had begun to slowly fade as he became more resigned to his fate, but his conversation with Shuga today had opened those wounds once more.

I don't want to be the damn Mikado.

The Mikado wasn't human. Thus, once Chagum became the Mikado, no one would treat him like one anymore. He wouldn't be able to have any close friends with whom to speak freely.

Chagum was hiding feelings of deep despair in his heart. Up until now, what had helped him hold them off was his memories of the scenery of Nayugu; those bottomless, clear, and still-as-death depths he saw when he was the Nyunga Ro Chaga, or the Guardian of the Spirit.

What he saw there were not things that he could put into words. Just remembering what he felt in those depths continued to support Chagum. But tonight, even those thoughts bore down heavily on his heart and couldn't sweeten the bitterness of having no way out.

Within Chagum's heavy heart, the melody of a particular song began to play. A beautiful melody interlacing heart-rending feelings with a cheerful tune. It was the melody of a ballad he had recently heard at the festival meant to console the First Queen. It told the tragic story of something that will never again be within one's reach.

He wanted to leave this stuffy darkness and breathe in the mountain air with everyone again. If only he could free himself and fly back to those times…

Once he eventually started descending into sleep, the voice, still singing in the back of his mind, changed into a familiar and kind one. Chagum turned to face the direction of the voice and saw a warm, soft light in the distance. He then fell towards that light and away from himself.

All the while feeling gently enveloped in the fragrance of an unknown flower.

“I don’t want to!”

Balsa was lying on her back, listening to Yugno mumbling in his sleep.

“Please stop! Stop…”

Yugno was taking in huge breaths and groaning as if he were being strangled.

Balsa got up and looked at Yugno through the thin darkness of dawn. He was tearing at his own throat, almost as if to rip someone’s hands away.

“Yugno! Hey, Yugno! Are you okay?” When Balsa grabbed his shoulders and shook him, he sprung away from her. He took in another deep breath, this time with a whistling sound, then, finally, opened his eyes. He shook uncontrollably as he breathed roughly and stared aimlessly into the darkness.

“Are you okay? That must have been some nightmare.”

Yugno turned to Balsa and wiped off some sweat. “Ah, shit... That was scary.”

Balsa looked at Yugno with a wry smile. “That’s my line. Just what kind of nightmare was that?”

“Just the usual. But normally it’s a good dream. I don’t know why it suddenly turned into a nightmare today.” Yugno looked at Balsa with frightened eyes. “I don’t think I’ll be able to get back to sleep like this. Could I ask you to hold my hand, Miss Balsa?”

“Eh?” Balsa looked at him in utter amazement. The frightened and trembling Yugno looked young, almost like a small boy. His expression was definitely not that of a fifty-two year old adult. His eyes were like those of a

little brother, asking his older sister to stay with him because he was still afraid of the dark, but too embarrassed to go and tell his parents.

It would seem that not just his appearance, but also his heart, hasn't caught up with his years.

Despite having such thoughts, she didn't really feel like holding hands. "That wasn't funny." She waved her hands nervously. "I'm gonna try getting some more sleep. You should too. They say you can't have the same nightmare twice."

Yugno sighed after seeing Balsa slump into a sleeping position. "That's harsh. In my case we're not talking about twice, I might just keep having that nightmare. Ehhh... what should I do now?" He tried speaking to himself a bit more loudly, but Balsa didn't show any signs of paying attention.

Yugno sighed again and started thinking with a scowl on his face. Eventually, he made up his mind and took out a small shaving knife, about the length of his index finger, from the bag that he was using as a pillow. He placed it on his forehead, wrapped a towel around his head so that it wouldn't fall, and then lied down.

It was a ritual his mother used to ward off sickness or monsters that might be after his soul while he slept. After closing his eyes he was still afraid and couldn't sleep at first, but after listening to Balsa's quiet breaths for some time, he eventually dozed off into a dreamless sleep.

For those interested:

1. Yorsa is written □□□
2. Kainan Nanai is written □□□□□□□□
3. The business with the 'blood groove' in the sword being necessary to pull it out after stabbing is not correct. The groove in swords was to shave some weight off from the strongest part of the blade while retaining the blade's integrity. Here is an article if you care:

https://bshistorian.wordpress.com/2008/06/05/the-blood-groove/

4. Suraya is written □□□

Chapter 2 Part 1

Magic weaving and star reading

The waterway connecting the Torinaki and Aoyumi Rivers in Ogi no Shimo was often used by the commoners to transport heavy things. Next to it, there was a shop that sold almost everything despite its small size. Below the store sign which read ‘The Anything Shop’, many miscellaneous items were neatly lined up. The shop was run by a young couple with a sterling reputation. The inhabitants of Ogi no Shimo said that if a customer couldn’t find what they were looking for amongst the displayed goods, the young owner would search the district and easily find the desired item as if by magic.

The young wife was pretty enough that some customers frequently worried about her. “Aren’t you worried, leaving such a pretty wife to run the shop by herself? It’d be terrible if she caught the eyes of some bad guys.” The young

couple would laugh at such comments. “Thank you for worrying,” they would say with a smile. In truth, they had little to worry about. Toya and Saya, for those were their names, were friends with Balsa the Spear-wielder, whose name was known (and feared) by all such ‘bad guys’. A year ago, during the incident with the water spirit, Toya and Saya, who at the time were still beggars living under a bridge, saved Balsa. As thanks, whenever Balsa came to the Ogi no Shimo district, she stopped by their place.

The underworld was also teeming with stories of Torogai, who was rumoured to be the most powerful magic weaver around, frequently visiting due to her connection with Balsa. There weren’t any ‘bad guys’ in this town brave enough to stand up to a short-tempered magic weaver said to be able to turn people into turtles.

On this particular day too, at the back of the shop in the early hours before dawn, an ugly elderly lady with long limbs appeared alongside the morning mist. When she knocked on the back door twice, it was swiftly pulled open from the inside. The lady disappeared into the shop. Very soon after, a tall, merchant-like youth also appeared, knocked on the door, and was let inside.

Toya was startled upon seeing an unusual expression on the normally-calm youth.

“Is the Master here?”

“Yes, of course.”

Waiting not even a moment for Toya’s short response, the young man pulled on the decorative ribbon hung from the ceiling. With a bang, a part of the ceiling opened to allow a small ladder to fall out; while the shop appeared to only have a ground floor from the outside, in truth there was a cleverly-hidden space between the store sign and the roof.

The old woman scowled as she saw the young man climbing up the ladder. “What’s wrong? Did someone notice you?”

The young man, Shuga, shook his head. “Master Torogai, I have done something terrible.”

“Calm down first, then speak. This isn’t like you.”

“His Highness… His Highness the Crown Prince won’t wake up, just like the First Queen.”

Torogai’s usually-narrow eyes opened wide. “What? Since when?”

“Since at least the morning of yesterday, I have been told.” Shuga buried his face in his bloodlessly pale, cold hands. “The day before this, I told His Highness about these secret meetings of ours… It was thoughtless of me.”

Shuga lowered his hands slowly and looked up at Torogai. “You told me that people get trapped in their dreams because those dreams make them happy. Conversely, that would mean that someone who is happier while stuck in a dream is not likely to return from it. His Highness had lost all hope for his current life and his future. He felt that he was locked up in a dark and stuffy box. And that’s when I, ever so cruelly, opened up a hole through which he could see the outside world. A hole through which he could forever do no more than just look.”

For a while, Torogai didn’t speak, but simply looked at the young Star Reader. Eventually, however, she spoke in a whisper. “You probably know this yourself, but it sometimes helps to hear someone else say it.”

Torogai sighed but continued. “You’re not responsible for Chagum seeing what life outside the Palace is like, or for the fact that no matter how much he liked it he can never return to it. You’re not even responsible for the fact that he eventually has to become the Mikado. Matters like these are beyond the power of men. And it was Chagum himself who chose to escape from that by staying in a dream. You already understand this, do you not? Stop pointlessly blaming yourself.”

Shuga remained silent without moving even a muscle. Torogai shrugged her shoulders. “Having said that, though, we can’t leave Chagum to die like this.”

“How long do you think we have before he dies?”

“Normally it would be about ten days since you can at least make him drink water to some extent, but food is out of the question. Strangely, though, the girl that I’m treating with Tanda at the moment has been weakening very slowly. She’s been asleep for five days already, but the pallor that comes with weakening has not really set in. While her pulse slowed somewhat, it is still going strong. I can only think that this must be different to normal sleep.”

“Yes, the Star Reader looking after the First Queen also said something to that effect.”

“But even if he survives as long as twenty days, the fact that he will eventually weaken and die doesn’t change. I think it’s time to try the Soul Call after all.” After muttering that to herself Torogai lifted up her face. “That’s right! I was so surprised about Chagum that I forgot, but there is something I’ve been meaning to tell you. You said that Tendo speaks of a connection between the stars and the fates of men, right?”

“Yes, but the connection is very complex.”

“Well yeah, it would be. I get that, but if there is a connection between stars and men, then there should be some similarity between Chagum’s star and the First Queen’s star, shouldn’t there?

“I think there is a possibility of that, but…”

“How about you actually use those Tendo skills of yours to find out? If we put together our magic weaving and your Tendo, if we let them overlap, we might see an entirely new picture. Possibly a picture that no one has ever seen before.”

“While that might be true, a way that takes too long to save His Highness is useless.” Shuga noticed Torogai’s wide grin and glared at her. “What is so funny? Am I wrong?”

“No. I just found your naivety cute. Take a step back and think about the current situation. No matter how much you rush, you can’t save Chagum

with just Tendo. All you can do right now is leave everything to us and wait." Torogai looked at the frown distorting Shuga's face and warned him. "Waiting is hard, isn't it? But you can't do what you can't do, right? Once you've calmed down a bit, think about what I told you some more. That's what my teacher always used to say. Things that aren't useful right away are not necessarily useless forever, you see."

Tanda spent every day by Kaya's side while she continued to sleep. One time, Torogai also visited and examined Kaya, and although she confirmed that Kaya's soul was not inside her body, she decided to not try the Soul Call yet, opting instead to see how things went for a while longer.

Tanda's brother, Nosil, was annoyed that Torogai hadn't done anything yet, and complained that she did not live up to her reputation. Nosil's short temper was nothing new, but this time it cut Tanda deep; Torogai's uncharacteristic display of caution was hard to swallow.

Torogai was supposed to be the ostentatious kind of magic weaver whose methods involved jumping headfirst into danger and overcoming difficulties with raw power.

Why is this the one time she is being careful? I understand that, unlike with a simple curse or a case of the soul leaving the body, there are many things this time that we cannot predict, but just patiently waiting and seeing what happens will get us nowhere…

As soon as he walked in through the front door, he noticed the smell of the roof-straw that had, over the years, been permeated by smoke from the fireplace. After his eyes got used to the darkness inside, he could see Kaya wrapped up tightly in *shiluya* bedding, lying next to the sunken hearth. Neither Nosil, who worked from dawn til dusk, nor his wife who took care of both the children and did field work, nor any of their relatives had the time to watch over Kaya all day long.

Tanda sat down by her pillow and looked at her sleeping face. As before, she was smiling happily, but Tanda thought that her face seemed to have

shrunk since he last saw her.

The emaciation has begun.

Tanda softly took Kaya's hand. It was cold and dry. Her small palm was rough with cracks and fissures. He suddenly remembered the words she had said before as she looked at her palms. "Sometimes, I feel really strange. I think about how, in a year or two, these hands will hold a baby. And then in fifteen years that baby will get married and will be holding another baby. When I think about the future like this, for some reason, everything seems so empty and pointless."

Kaya's feelings at the time were surely similar to those of Torogai in her youth. When peasant girls reached this age, they mostly knew what the rest of their lives were going to look like. Some girls felt a terrible emptiness in this knowledge.

Tanda understood Kaya's feelings well. He was also, after all, always different from those around him. He knew deep down that his family loved him, but he also knew that his mother and father felt uneasy around a son who began to see the shadow of death in the face of the old woman who often stopped by for a chat over tea, or birds no one else could see lazily hovering in the twilight sky. His siblings openly laughed at him.

When he was eight, Tanda saw those dreamlike birds giving off a pale light and followed them into the mountains. The birds flew leisurely through the trees and, eventually, out into a small meadow. What Tanda found there was a shabby, small hut and he carefully watched as the birds descended into the chimney and disappeared.

Suddenly the door of the small hut opened, and a woman with a blackened face came out. She was uglier than any other woman he had seen in his life, but she looked straight at Tanda who was desperately hiding in the shadow of some bushes and said:

"Come out, boy."

Tanda didn't scare easily, so he came out of the bushes as he was told and approached the beckoning woman.

"What are you doing in such a place at this hour?"

Tanda truthfully told her that he followed the mysterious birds, and this seemed to greatly interest the woman. "Well isn't that something. You could see the birds I sent?"

After being made fun of for so long, Tanda started wondering whether the birds really were all in his head like his siblings often said. The old woman's confirmation of their existence made him really happy. "How did you send them? Why did you send them?"

"What do you think?"

Tanda answered the question truthfully again. "Were they searching for a soul?"

The old woman's eyes twinkled with mirth. "That's right. Why did you think that?"

"I saw the same birds yesterday too. They circled over the Torinaki River, above the Crying Depths, before suddenly disappearing into the water. That's why I thought that. They must have been looking for the lost child from the village to the west."

"Right again. That child was most likely called away by a Nouno; a river spirit. If I had been informed about it sooner, I could have saved the child. Now that he's already gone to the other side, though, I can't do anything."

After saying this, the woman looked at Tanda and grinned. "My birds couldn't bring back that child's soul, but it seems they brought me another one instead."

Tanda only got scared after hearing that. "Are you a mountain spirit?"

The woman scowled. "Don't be an idiot. Such spirits don't have physical forms, which you would know if you knew anything about mountain hags."

“What are mountain hags like? Do they eat people?”

The woman laughed out loud at seeing Tanda’s eyes sparkle with interest at this. “You like that kind of story, huh? You might just make a half-decent magic weaver.”

That was how he met Torogai.

After that, whenever Tanda had any free time he would spend it at Torogai’s side. Eventually, Tanda’s parents more or less gave up on their slacking son, tacitly consenting to his strange, newfound lifestyle; as the third son he wouldn’t have inherited the fields anyway.

While with Torogai, Tanda met a strange Kanbalese man and his daughter. The two of them were freeloading at Torogai’s small hut. The girl was two years Tanda’s senior, skinny, and always covered in scratches. Meanwhile, her father was muscular, dependable-looking and always had a sharp glint in his eyes. After a while he found out that they weren’t actually related, but both of them were very taciturn and did not try to speak to Tanda much.

It looked like the two of them, from dusk till dawn, spent all of their time wandering around the mountains. Sometimes they also sparred, with real weapons no less, on the grassy patch of land in front of the small hut.

Tanda once saw the girl, only ten at the time, get slashed across the forehead by the tip of the man’s spear. These days, he would classify the wound as a rather shallow one, but as forehead wounds bleed a lot the girl’s face was entirely covered in blood in seconds, and Tanda was terrified.

What’s more, despite the fact that the girl now couldn’t see anything, the man continued his assault. That’s when Tanda really got to see something surprising. The girl jumped backwards, avoiding the man’s attack, before she even wiped the blood from her eyes. She then quickly ran into a small grove and stayed there for a while. When she came back out, her forehead was tightly bound with a strip of cloth she made out of her own sleeve to stop the bleeding.

The girl glanced at the dumbfounded Tanda and asked about the man.

“Where is Jiguro?”

“He was sharpening his spear until a short while ago, when he went in the direction of the swamp.”

The girl nodded and started to go towards the swamp herself, when, before he could stop himself, Tanda found himself calling out to her. “Doesn’t your wound hurt?”

She turned around and answered curtly. “It hurts.”

“Wait a second then.” He rushed back to Torogai’s house and returned with a small medicine jar. He removed the cloth from the girl’s forehead and smeared the medicine on the wound. It should have been very painful, but she didn’t even show so much as a slight grimace. Meanwhile, it hurt Tanda just to look at it.

After he finished tying her headband back on, the girl showed Tanda a rare smile. “Thanks.”

This girl was Balsa. Since that time, Tanda has treated Balsa’s wounds countless times, but that was the first.

Tanda smiled wryly.

I wonder what she is up to now?

Balsa, unlike Tanda and Torogai, did not *choose* to veer off the path her life would have normally taken. Instead, at the tender age of six, she was forcefully pushed off that path whether she liked it or not. After her father was murdered her own life was also targeted. She was pursued and forced to live in dark uncertainty, never knowing when death might come. The Kanbalese King, who was responsible for sending the assassins after them, finally died when Balsa was twenty-one, but by this point it was too late for her to return to the normalcy of being a wife and mother even if she had wanted to.

Balsa, of course, no longer harboured wishes for such a life anyway. She had become all too aware of the smell of blood that had seeped deep into her skin, of the intense and ugly desire to fight, hidden deep in her heart. Knowing these things of herself, she had but one path in life to choose: that of a bodyguard for hire.

After her foster father died the only place Balsa could call home was, unexpectedly, the small, shabby hut that Torogai had since given to Tanda. Inevitably, she always showed up there between bodyguard jobs. Like a migrating bird resting its wings, if only for a little while, she would stay at Tanda's side before setting out travelling again.

Balsa wasn't particularly talkative, but when she returned to Tanda's she always told him a few stories of her travels. At such times Tanda thought of the enormity of what Balsa wouldn't tell him, and could almost physically feel that there was a part of Balsa's life that he couldn't see.

In the twenty years since they met, many things happened. Deep down, Tanda sometimes wanted to keep Balsa by his side with a burning passion. These feelings, as intense as the summer sunlight, changed with time to something more akin to the light of autumn, and these days he felt that the way they lived now was most suited to who they were.

Having said that, though, time and again the feelings of wanting someone's company slowly crept up on Tanda, just as a pendulum unavoidably swings back. At times, like when Master Torogai returned and taught Tanda some magic weaving, he could forget those feelings. Torogai suddenly returned to her travels on a whim though, leaving Tanda with nothing but his feelings for Balsa as company.

Tanda slowly looked around his brother's house. Six straw cushions were neatly arranged around the sunken hearth. He could imagine a sweaty Nosil dropping down with a thud on one of these dirty and squashed cushions at dinner time, after a day of work. Just like their father used to. Their father, who was always surrounded by the inconsequential noise of family life.

Tanda wouldn't ever return to that bustle. He chose the path of magic weaving. Surrounded by the silence of his solitude, punctuated only by the whispers of spirits.

He rubbed his chin.

Before he realised it, thirty years of his life had passed. He had maybe forty more. What could he achieve in those forty years? What could one achieve in a single lifetime? What did he even gain in return for giving up a life surrounded by family?

As he thought that he suddenly remembered what Torogai had said when she taught him the Soul Call. He could hear her voice resounding deep within his head.

"Humans are weird creatures, you know? They need a reason to live. Birds and beasts and insects don't dwell on such things, but humans sometimes worry so much they end up killing themselves. Listen well Tanda. It's not enough just to look for a soul when performing the Soul Call. After you find the soul, which has lost its way and wandered away from life, you have to help it remember. That they're still part of a living being. About the red-hot power of life. About the thread that connects them to that life."

Those words resonated powerfully within Tanda's chest.

He also remembered the first time he rose from his own body as a soul, under the guidance of Master Torogai. He remembered the dizziness, the surprise and the delight he felt as he gazed at the sights of Nayugu, the world of spirits.

"Kaya…" Tanda called out to his sleeping niece. "There is joy as well as sadness. There are so many different things. But you weren't in such despair over your life that you meant to sleep through the rest of it, barely different from the dead, right?"

When Tanda felt a pulse in Kaya's thin and cold wrist, he decided that he would try to do the Soul Call by himself.

He would be putting his life in danger, perhaps. But if this was a skill he couldn't use at a critical time like this, then learning it was meaningless. Torogai was even conveniently away right now, meeting Shuga in the capital. If he started the preparations now, he could go after Kaya's soul before Master Torogai could stop him. He stood up and hurried back to his house to ready the things necessary for the Soul Call ritual.

For those interested:

1. Nouno is written □□□.

Chapter 2 Part 2

The Flower's trap

Tanda returned, having gathered all of the necessities for the ceremony, just as his sister in law came back from drawing water. He asked her to not let anyone into the hut until evening, as he was going to be attempting some complicated magic weaving inside.

Nosil's house was very much like all the other farmers' houses - shaped like an upside-down bowl with walls of mud. Other than the south-facing door, the only source of light was the hole at the highest point of the roof for letting smoke out. There were no windows. A straw carpet was spread out over the earth below, with a space in the middle cut out for the sunken hearth. Kaya was lying on the west side of that sunken hearth, wrapped up in *shiluya*.

First, Tanda closed the doors. He then erected four bamboo stalks, one in each cardinal direction, around the room. He tied the stalks together with hemp rope, making a square barrier. He then sat cross-legged by Kaya's pillow and held onto a magic weaving tool, which was made from a spike of zebra grass, for the purpose of Soul Sending.

The Soul Call ceremony had to begin with the magic weaver's soul leaving their own body.

Tanda closed his eyes and started rocking his body back and forth while murmuring the incantation. His swaying motion then gradually became circular. To the right, to the left. To the right, to the left.

Inside his gently swaying body, Tanda's soul, like a baby rocked by its mother, began to take on a round shape. After a while it became a small

and warm jewel.

Tanda dreamed of Birds. Let the incandescent jewel turn into a Bird. Let it.

And it did. Eventually it transformed into a bird on light wings.

When the Bird opened its eyes, it could see a single ray of light amongst the surrounding dimness. It extended from Kaya's forehead, and high up into the sky. Tanda single-mindedly followed it upwards.

When he looked below, he could see his own soul's thread extending behind him. At the other end of the thread, a bright light shined from the tool made of zebra grass that his body was still holding. It would be his guidelight when the time to return to his body came.

While he was flying around effortlessly, he saw many other white, shining threads, all extending in the same direction. These threads, shining with a pale light, all disappeared into the fog ahead. Tanda followed the threads, ending up in the fog himself.

He was suddenly gripped by a piercing fear. The fog behind him changed into netting in an instant.

Oh no.

Once he realised that he had walked into a trap, Tanda changed the shape of his soul from that of a bird to that of a long sword and was about to cut through the netting. However, he stopped himself from actually doing it; the netting was made of threads that linked other wandering souls to their bodies.

"Tanda." He heard a voice calling his name. "Come down here."

The direction from which he heard the voice was as dark as night. In that darkness he could see a few dim, crimson lights.

The colour was that of a warm fire burning on a cold night. From above, it was clear that the lights were split into small groups, and the most vibrant light in each group stood in the center, flickering.

Are those shining lights... petals?

While he was watching the soft and warm lights, nostalgia washed over him. He gently transformed back from a sword into a bird and descended

towards the lights.

It was night in this world, but with the light of the flowers Tanda could see that he was descending towards a huge internal garden of a large palace, devoid of human presence. Every time the flowers swayed, shadows danced through the corridors and across the roof made of plain wood. When he landed in the garden and changed shape from a bird to a human, he felt a coldness around his feet and looked down in surprise, noticing that the garden was submerged in crystal-clear water up to the height of his ankles.

The Flower was blooming out of that water. From one thick stalk, supported by roots stretching out in every direction, many more thin stalks, covered thickly in leaves, reached out like branches. Far above Tanda, amidst the many stalks, flowers were blooming in one big group. Amongst them, there was one flower in particular that stood out. This giant, which seemed the most likely to bear fruit, was growing out of the end of the thickest stalk. Both the big flower and the smaller ones were similar to closed bellflowers whose insides glowed with warm, fiery light.

Those lights were reflected in the water, making this place indescribably beautiful.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Tanda turned his head to look for the owner of the voice. Someone was in one of the corridors surrounding the garden, and beckoning him. Tanda climbed a few stairs to reach the corridor and stopped there.

A tall man was standing there. He was wearing a long gray robe, tied with an emerald-green sash. His right side was illuminated by the light of the flowers, but for some reason Tanda couldn’t see what his face looked like. Or more accurately, he felt that the harder he tried to look, the more vague his appearance became.

“Tanda, son of Tomca.”

Tanda shook his head at this title. “Torogai, or as you call her Tomca, did indeed raise me, but we aren’t related.” Tanda had the vague feeling that

the man smiled. “If your souls are connected, regardless of blood ties, you are family.”

Those words hit Tanda with unexpected force. Torogai was an intense and strong woman who was not suited to motherhood, but perhaps, somewhere deep down, he did think of her as his mother. “And you are the Flower’s Keeper, are you not?”

The man nodded. Tanda began to speak calmly. “If you know who I am, then why did you try to stop me from leaving with the net made of soul threads? I did not come here to harm the Flower, only to return a soul it has captured to its original body.”

“This world exists for the Flower. It exists because the Flower dreams it. The Dreams live in the flowers and encourage them to bear fruit. In return, the Flower lets them dream their greatest desires.”

That much was obvious. Tanda looked away from the man and turned to face the Flower for a while. “That’s right. In my world, in return for receiving nectar from flowers, insects transport the pollen and contribute to fruit production. That alone would be fine, but…” Tanda returned his gaze to the man. “Most flowers don’t put the lives of those insects in danger. They spend only a short amount of time on the flowers and live out the rest of their insect lives until they eventually die. However, if someone is captured by the Flower’s dream and stays there too long, they die. Surely this isn’t normal.”

The man’s glowing eyes were the only part of his shadowed face that Tanda could make out. “That is not the Flower’s sin. It’s that child’s fault.”

“That child?”

“The soul of the baby that Tomca took with her. He’s living in your world now.”

Tanda remembered Torogai’s story.

The soul that Master Torogai was clutching to her chest as she returned!

“What, exactly, is his fault? How is he related to the fact that the dreaming souls can’t return?”

“He is the Wind, you see. When Tomca returned to your world with him, a long time ago, a thin passage between this world and your world opened. At night, he uses that passage to return to this world as a soul. Because this is where he was born. His mother’s womb.”

Tanda felt the hair on the nape of his neck stand on end as he listened to the man’s voice. At some point during his speech, his voice began to be accompanied by a high pitched echo, like a woman’s voice. It was only for a moment though; his voice soon returned to how it was before.

“He is the child born alongside the Flower, inseparable from this world. When this beautiful Flower bloomed in the garden, he became the Wind that allows the Flower to bear its fruit; the Wind that invites the dreams of people from your world.”

Tanda raised his head suddenly. Torogai said something to that effect too. “Then Kaya and the others were invited here by him, and got trapped in their dreams?”

The Flower’s Keeper nodded. “Yes. But you mustn't be upset about that. He is the Wind after all. When the time comes for the Flower to bear fruit, the one who will shake the Flower, wake the Dreams, and return them to your world will also be him.”

“Then when he comes back here and wakes the Dreams, Kaya and the others will be able to return to their bodies?”

The Flower’s Keeper nodded once again. “Yes. But he has stopped coming lately.”

“What?”

“The Flower’s fruit is ripening. In just three days there will be a half-moon and the Flower will die, its petals scattering to the wind.”

“Three days of my world’s time?”

“Yes. Since Tomca’s visit that opened the passage that joined our two worlds, their time has been joined too. Look.”

The Flower’s Keeper pointed up at the moon, visible in the night sky. It did indeed look like it would soon become a half-moon. “At the time of the half-moon, a strong wind will come blowing in from the outside. Strong enough to scatter all the petals. This world will die along with the Flower. The Dreams invited over from your world, slumbering here, have to be awakened by that boy’s soft wind before the petals scatter. They must be gently incited to return to their own world, lest they face death here, scattering along with the Flower’s petals.”

Tanda looked at the swaying flowers. They were attached to the stalks so flimsily that they looked as if they could fall off at any second.

“Why?” Tanda whispered. “Why isn’t he coming back?”

The Flower’s Keeper lowered his voice and replied hoarsely. “I don’t know either. Why did he run away? Why won’t he come back?”

Tanda scowled. “How is that possible? He knows that he’s responsible for all these lives, doesn’t he? Are you sure he won’t be back? Just in time before the night of the half-moon?”

Tanda felt that the Flower’s Keeper smiled faintly. “Are you saying that we should wait until then? That is by far too dangerous a gamble. He used to come here every night, and yet for the past few nights he hasn’t. He’s choosing not to return of his own free will. What if we wait and he doesn’t return?” The Flower’s Keeper continued in a quiet voice. “I don’t care either way. All that matters to me is that the Flower is about to bear fruit, you see. But, if you want to save the Dreams, you have to bring him here, even if that means using force. That’s the only way to save the lives of the people trapped here. I only hold power in this world. Only someone born in your world, someone with a physical body, can pursue him.”

Tanda opened his eyes wide. “So, I should…”

“Yes. Will you try? However, he is the Wind. A normal human wouldn’t be able to catch him in three days. If you borrow the Flower’s power, though, you will be able to access powers beyond those of men.”

“Powers beyond those of men?”

“The power to be able to find one born of the Flower no matter where he might be. And the power to catch him no matter how far you have to chase him. The power of the one who protects the Flower, the Flower’s Guardian.” Suddenly, the voice of the Flower’s Keeper seemed to be echoing through the entire world, and it enveloped Tanda with its hum. “Become the Flower’s Guardian, Tanda! To save those who sleep within the Flower!”

The scent of the flowers surrounded Tanda and his consciousness began to fade, as if he were drunk. That feeling alerted Tanda’s careful nature; he was desperately resisting the power that was coming over him while trying to think.

“Tanda. Son of Tomca.”

The scent became strong enough to choke him as he felt everything grow hazy and desperately tried to move his body.

“Become the Flower’s Guardian, Tanda! Please, bring him back to me!”

Tanda closed his eyes. He gritted his teeth, fighting the oppressive scent, trying to retain his senses.

This might be a trap. Something isn’t right.

Tanda managed to think this despite his haziness, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what, exactly, wasn’t right.

Don’t forget. I came here to rescue Kaya. Think only of rescuing Kaya.

As Tanda thought those thoughts, the Flower’s Keeper started whispering.

“He sang to the girl called Kaya and to all the others. That is how he invited them to come over to the Flower. He is responsible for bringing them here.”

Tanda struggled, and somehow found the strength to ask the Flower’s Keeper a question. “He invites the souls over here by singing?”

“Yes.”

“Then that would make him a singer, would it not?”

“Yes.”

A strong anger started welling up in Tanda’s chest. The travelling singer whom Kaya fell in love with! He was most likely Torogai’s dream-son. It was he who planted dreams that could never come true in Kaya’s still young heart. He brought her here by stirring up her feelings of hopelessness.

He enticed her with a dream that no one can grasp no matter how hard they try!

Tanda was usually a rather cheerful person, but the rage roiling in his chest right now was unfathomably intense. It was that hatred, directed at the singer, that swayed Tanda's heart.

He had no idea what would happen to him if he became the Flower’s Guardian. But, as things stood, he had no way to save Kaya. To achieve that - to bring back that man and force him to do his duty - Tanda had no choice but to become the Flower’s Guardian.

Tanda slowly returned his gaze from the flowers to the Flower’s Keeper. “Very well. I will become the Flower’s Guardian.”

Guided by the Flower’s Keeper, Tanda descended into the palace’s internal garden once again. Together, they approached the main stalk. It was so thick that even four adults wouldn’t be able to encircle it with their arms, and at its base a large number of roots were entwined with each other in a complex way.

Tanda was guided to sit cross legged in a depression among the mass of roots that looked almost like a chair. The Flower's Keeper then stood in front of Tanda and asked him to remove the clothing from his upper body, leaving him wearing nothing but a hakama.

Next, he reached out and touched Tanda with his finger, tracing out a line starting from Tanda's right calf and moving past his knee. The skin where his finger made contact turned green, as if a vine were creeping up his leg.

"Your right leg is yours no more. It shall become the Flower's." While the Flower's Keeper was so chanting, Tanda felt the sensation in his right leg disappear, and was captured by an intense fear.

The Flower's Keeper quickly drew the same pattern on Tanda's left leg. "Your left leg is yours no more. It shall become the Flower's."

Losing feeling in both legs so quickly was a terrifying experience.

Calm down. Calm down. If nothing else, keep track of your soul.

Tanda grit his teeth and withstood it. The Flower's Keeper moved forwards a little, casting a shadow over Tanda's face. He touched Tanda's throat with his finger, eliciting an involuntary shiver. The finger traced another vine down from his throat, past his chest and stomach.

"Your body is yours no more. It shall become the Flower's."

Finally, Tanda went numb throughout his entire body; his head alone still felt anything.

The Flower's Keeper removed the head of one flower from its stalk. It became a mask with no holes that covered not only both eyes, but the nose and mouth as well. From the head of the flower, pointy leaves extended. They reminded Tanda of Kaya's hair.

When the mask was placed in front of his eyes, Tanda grit his teeth once more and observed it.

Subsequently, when the Flower's Keeper opened his mouth to say the final chant, Tanda thought that he saw the him briefly split in two with a slight motion. In that transient moment, Tanda felt a cold wind stroke his face and his head became clear.

"Your dreams are…"

Hearing the start of the spell and feeling the mask touch his face, Tanda barely managed to silently chant a phrase of his own.

Both chants reverberated inside Tanda at the same time.

"yours no more. They shall become the Flower's."

Only my dreams shall remain mine.

He immediately felt an impact as if he had been thrown back, and all feeling left his body.

For those interested:

1. Soul Sending is written □□□ (tamayose). Now, □ has lots of meanings, but I get the general idea of either collecting things or pushing/sending/delivering from it so that's what that name is supposed to represent. Any better ideas?
2. Hakama are a type of trousers, which look like a skirt. Look them up. Japanese martial arts often use them.

Chapter 2 Part 3

Balsa's fight to the death with the Flower's Guardian

When Nosil's house came into Torogai's view, she noticed that something was off. Outside it, some children were gathered in a huddle and crying. Tanda's sister in law, Naka, was embracing them while trembling herself.

"What happened? Tell me!" When Torogai came running, Naka pointed at the roof with a shaking hand. "A monster that looked like a giant monkey jumped out of there…"

Torogai began to scowl as she noticed that the door to the house was shut. Dread welled up in her chest. "That idiot. Did he try it alone?"

She quietly chanted a spell as she touched the door to blow it open. As the door fell, kicking up a cloud of dust, the rope barrier that Tanda had made fell apart.

Only Kaya was lying inside the dim hut; Tanda was nowhere to be seen. Torogai crouched next to Kaya's pillow and picked up the tool made of zebra grass used in the Soul Call. The tool was burnt and blackened, and it fell apart in Torogai's hands.

She stood up and looked through the smoke hole in the roof. Before Torogai broke it on her way in, the barrier had not been damaged. Tanda must have left the hut through the smoke hole.

The smoke hole was more than twice Tanda's height above ground level though. As there weren't any footholds with which to climb up to it, this could only mean that he jumped through it using nothing but leg strength.

Naka mentioned a large monkey-like monster.

Having guessed what had happened, Torogai gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. After a few moments, she opened her eyes once more, focused her consciousness and chanted a spell to track the disturbance.

It would seem that Tanda only left this hut a short time ago as the disturbance was fresh enough to be clearly felt. Torogai ran out of the hut to follow its path.

“Who knew there was a house in a place like this? Not too long ago I stayed at the nearby village, but I didn’t know that people lived this far out.”, said Yugno, standing on the grassy patch in front of Tanda’s house. “But it looks like nobody's around.”

Balsa nodded. “He’s either out picking herbs or examining his patients. He won’t mind though, so let’s go inside. We can light a fire…”

While saying that, she touched the door to open it and her entire body broke out into goosebumps. When she whirled around, readying her spear, it seemed that Yugno had also received a warning from the echos, as he was anxiously staring at Balsa.

It wasn't bloodlust, but it was terrifying. It was an unsettling feeling as if they had only just noticed that a wolf had been watching them from the shadow of a nearby grove for some time.

It swooped down from the treetops and attacked, with such speed that Yugno could only see a black blur. Balsa, meanwhile, could clearly tell that it was human shaped.

It went straight for Yugno. Balsa almost sent him flying to get him out of the way in time before rolling on the grass to face the thing. Seeing its face, however, caused Balsa to stop in her tracks for a second. “Tanda!”

It was wearing Tanda’s clothes and had his face, but its expression was not that of a human. The white glimmer in his eyes was like that of a wolf preparing to pounce on its prey.

Paying no attention to Balsa's spear, Tanda attacked her. She immediately flipped her spear with a whoosh and aimed the butt at his solar plexus. He used the heel of his back foot to turn sideways and dodge the thrust without halting his advance.

From that stance, he thrust his right hand at Balsa's face. She leapt away, barely avoiding it.

She had no idea what was going on, but she couldn't bring herself to stab something that looked like Tanda with her spear. Having understood that these feelings were slowing her movements, she threw down her spear.

She aimed a sweep kick just above Tanda's knee, but he jumped into the air with unbelievable ease, completely dodging it. From there he unleashed a kick of his own. Balsa only just managed to twist her body away, so that it was not her head that received the sharp kick. The intense impact, from which it was clear that nothing was being held back, connected with her left shoulder instead.

If that kick had landed on her neck, her spine would have most likely been severed, leading to an instant death. After receiving such a blow, Balsa clearly understood that Tanda was undoubtedly trying to kill her.

After getting some distance between them by rolling away, Balsa stood up and faced Tanda. He closed the gap between them effortlessly, but in the second he reached out with both hands to grab her neck, Balsa grabbed both of his wrists, stepped into his chest and twisted. Tanda's body spun around as it fell. It wasn't a large throw, but it was sharp enough to drop Tanda onto the ground without letting him roll away. That finally stopped his movements for a second.

While still holding Tanda's right wrist, Balsa flipped him onto his front and pushed down on a certain point on his back with her knee. Compressing this point makes breathing impossible. Not to mention the wrist she was still holding, and had twisted to the point of what should have been considerable pain. Tanda shouldn't have been able to even make a sound, let alone move.

Even so, Tanda did not stop moving.

“Tanda, stop! You’ll break your arm!” A bitter lump rose from her stomach to her chest. Breaking someone’s arm was a terrifying feeling. Even more so when the arm belonged to Tanda. She could feel beads of cold sweat form on her forehead. Under her hand, the bones of Tanda’s arm were creaking.

“Tanda!”

He stood up anyway, showing no sign that the creaking of his bones was causing him difficulty or pain. Balsa gritted her teeth and made her decision. She strained his arm while twisting, and with a disgusting sound, she dislocated his right shoulder.

At the same time, she felt something hit her face and she flinched. Tanda had twisted his body and punched her in the face with his left hand. The pain of a dislocated shoulder should have been overwhelming. Balsa was shocked that he was capable of attacking. She saw stars before her eyes and noticed a smell as if something were burning in the back of her nose. She almost passed out.

Tanda’s left hand grabbed Balsa’s neck. She aimed for the crook of his elbow with an open palm strike, but missed and with all her strength she struck his ear. With his eardrum pierced, Tanda’s head shook violently and he fell onto his back as he slowly collapsed, facing the sky.

Balsa breathed in great gulps of air as she shivered. Despite having battled countless times, she hadn't previously experienced a fight so terrifying. Her opponent was someone who she didn't want to even hurt, let alone kill. She had no idea what to do next.

Tanda’s body rose as if controlled by invisible strings. Balsa gritted her teeth and scrunched her face as she watched this.

When Tanda's unseeing eyes turned to her, a ball of fire appeared at the tip of his nose. More balls of fire appeared to his left and his right and surrounded him.

“Flames, flames. Those who burn, those who dance…” The spell reverberated through the meadow, more sung than chanted. When Balsa looked in the direction that the voice was coming from, she saw Torogai. She was rubbing her hands together while looking at Tanda with half-lidded eyes.

Tanda twisted his body, writhing to get away from the flames. The flames became ropes of light, and when they converged on him, Tanda ended up flying through the air as if he had been flung by something. He grabbed a branch of one of the trees above him with one hand, and disappeared into the mountains.

Balsa, entirely drenched in sweat, was kneeling in the grass and gasping.

The flames disappeared at some point. Balsa didn't know this, but the flames weren't real. They were an illusion, shown only to the mind’s eye through the power of magic weaving.

“Master Torogai.” Balsa wiped the sweat off of her forehead and stood up. “What was that?”

Torogai was also covered in sweat. “Get in the house for now. You over there, too. I'll make a four-directional barrier inside. Otherwise, he will come again.”

Yugno was still dumbfounded, but Balsa picked up her spear and pushed him into the house.

Chapter 2 Part 4

The Flower's son

Torogai came into the hut while Yugno was lighting the sunken hearth. “Balsa, did that thing attack you?”

Balsa shook her head in response. “No. It attacked this man, Yugno, first. When I tried helping him, it started attacking me.” She paused. “That was Tanda.”

Torogai sat by the hearth and heaved a massive sigh. That just spurred Balsa on. “It looked like Tanda, but it was inhuman. Its presence was like that of a beast. Besides, the way it moved was beyond Tanda’s physical ability. Not to mention that overwhelming strength it used without hesitation to try and kill me.” She paused again. “Look at this.”

She undid her over clothes, baring her left shoulder. It had turned purple and swollen terribly. “I was ready for that kick and used a breathing technique to deflect the attack, so I got off lightly, but if it had surprised me and I took it head on instead, my bones would have been crushed. It was that strong a kick.”

Torogai nodded. “That’s right. If it had been anyone but you, they would have died there.” She silenced Balsa with a look before she could interrupt. “I’ll tell you what happened to Tanda in a second. But before that, won’t you introduce that man to me?”

Balsa explained how she had saved Yugno five days ago, at dawn, and how he was Li Tou Ruen or ‘the one who is loved by the echoes'. She also told Torogai that he was fifty-two years old, regardless of his youthful

appearance. Torogai stared at Yugno throughout the whole explanation, making him feel uncomfortable and fidgety.

When Balsa finished speaking, Torogai continued to unblinkingly stare at Yugno for some time. Eventually she whispered. “Unbelievable! Just as Master Norugai said, the threads of fate that connect us all truly do exist!”

She then shook her head once to get herself under control again and started explaining the happenings of the last few days. She told them about the people who weren't waking up, like Tanda’s niece and Chagum, about the dream she had so long ago, about the son she gave birth to in the Flower’s world, about the Night of the Flower. Everything leading up to what she had seen in Nosil’s house earlier that afternoon. “As you can see, Balsa, that was indeed Tanda, but at the same time, not Tanda. What you saw was unmistakably that kind-hearted idiot, his soul taken away by the Flower.”

Torogai glanced from Balsa to Yugno. “But why did Tanda attack you? Do you have any clue why the Flower might want to attack you?”

Balsa saw Yugno’s face turn pale as he looked at Torogai. He whispered very quietly. “Well... you know... but... that’s not… To think that the Flower’s Guardian would *actually* come…”

“Don’t just mumble like a fool! Explain yourself properly!” Yugno ducked his head in surprise at Torogai’s raised voice and looked at her uncomfortably.

“Please don’t shout. Why are you shouting? I don’t understand any of this myself!” He scowled, as if deep in thought. “First, let me get something straight. From what you said, you must be Tomca, right?”

“Yes. But that’s a name I forgot more than fifty years ago.”

Yugno licked his lips. “That is to say, you are the one who gave birth to me in that world?”

“That is indeed what seems to be the case. However, I don’t feel like calling myself your mother. All I did was help the soul of a dead man, living within

the Flower's seed, turn into a new soul."

Yugno wrinkled his nose. "I don't exactly see you as my mother either. You're nothing like the Tomca that my dad described."

Torogai wrinkled her whole face. "Dad?"

"Yeah. The man you call the Flower's Keeper." Yugno sighed. "Ever since I was born, I've only ever seen one dream. You know the one: the Flower continuing to grow in that garden shrouded in pale blue twilight, and Dad, who always seems so tall. He told me about the circumstances of my birth, and the job I was supposed to do for the Flower. As I listened to him in that garden, it never crossed my mind that this was in any way strange or not normal."

"When I found out that other people dreamt many different dreams, I was surprised and started to wonder why I was the only one. My fate was different from the very start, huh?"

Balsa stretched out her body to get rid of the numbness. "Sorry to rain on your parade, but rather than all this dream-talk, can we just get to the point? Why exactly is Tanda a monster and why is he coming after you?"

Yugno blinked helplessly. "Well now... that's... the one bit I don't get just yet."

Balsa grabbed Yugno's shoulders and shook him lightly in annoyance. "You said you were given a job for the Flower. What is that exactly? Could it be that they're coming after you because you're not fulfilling your duty to the Flower, or something?"

Yugno shook his head. "No! I did everything I was told to!"

Torogai cut in. "Anyway, what exactly is your duty?"

Yugno hurriedly glanced at Balsa, then turned to Torogai. "All I did was give pleasant dreams to the lonely souls that thought their lives up to this point had been empty."

“When the Flower started sprouting buds, Dad said it was time. Time to invite the dreams that will pollinate the flower and become the sweet wind, or something.”

After finally understanding, Balsa put some strength into her hands, still on Yugno’s shoulders. “That song… it’s *that* song isn’t it? The one that you sung for the First Queen.”

There was something bitter in Balsa’s voice. “I will never forget how I felt listening to it. That song made me want all the things that I could never have, no matter how hard I wished for them. Once you’ve heard it, it lingers somewhere in the back of your head and doesn’t go away.”

Balsa continued to stare at Yugno. “You used that song to invite weak people's hearts to the dream.”

A heavy silence fell upon them. Yugno looked at Balsa with a frown on his face for a while, but eventually he tilted his head slightly in a fashion reminiscent of a little bird. “Are you angry, Miss Balsa?”

Balsa didn’t answer. Yugno blinked and started to mumble in dissatisfaction. “Why are you angry? Even though I gave all those people the greatest gift? One no other singer could give! Isn’t that true? Even if you want one, dreams that make you so happy as to not want to wake up are not all that common!”

Balsa took a deep breath to calm her rage and spoke. “Did it ever occur to you that people might not be quite so thankful if they knew they would die as a result of experiencing such a wonderful dream?”

“What? Die? What are you talking about? Oh, I get it. You’re worried that they won’t ever wake up again, is that it?” Yugno frowned. “It’s probably not such a big deal. See, these people were only summoned to make the Flower bear seed, right? When that happens, they won’t be needed any longer; there is no need to keep them there until they die, right? Won’t they come back once their job is done?”

Torogai narrowed her eyes, trying to remember something. “That’s right. Long ago, when I asked him, the Flower’s Keeper said that if the Dreams want to return, they can. Even if no one wants to wake up from a dream that pleasant, it doesn’t feel to me like the Flower is sucking souls in then killing them, as a carnivorous plant captures insects. Instead, it calls insects over for pollination, diligently giving them sweet nectar. Their lives are only connected for a second. That’s what it felt like. That’s why I wasn't as worried as Tanda, to be honest. When the seeds come, when the Flower’s Keeper says it is time, the Dreams will surely come back. That’s how I used to feel, at least.”

Torogai rubbed her arms while looking at Yugno.

“But now I don’t feel like that anymore. If the Flower truly intended to return everyone, there would be no need to turn Tanda into the Flower’s Guardian when he only went there to get the souls back. What’s going on, I wonder? The gears are out of alignment. Something is not right…”

After trailing off, Torogai pensively poked her forehead with a finger. “When does the Flower bear seed? When is the role of the Dreams finished? If I only knew the timeframes, I could maybe do something using the Soul Call.”

Mumbling, as if to herself, Torogai looked at Yugno. “You’ve watched over the Flower’s growth for as long as you can remember, isn’t that right? Don’t you know how long after pollination the seeds will come?”

Yugno scratched his chin. “Hmmm. Unfortunately, that I do not know.”

Balsa, sickened at Yugno’s nonchalant tone, turned to face him as well. “It was you who invited all those people to go over to the Flower! Don’t you feel any sense of responsibility for what happens to them?”

Yugno looked at Balsa, puzzled. “Responsibility? Why? I certainly sang a stirring song, but if they don’t want to wake up from an enjoyable dream, that’s their business. I’m not forcing anyone to do anything. Why should I feel responsible for them?”

Balsa opened her mouth to say something, but soon closed it without uttering a thing. She decided that their ways of thinking were just too different. She lost even the willpower to be angry.

Yugno scowled in dissatisfaction. “They have it good, to tell you the truth. They get to have nice dreams. The other day, when I was inside the Flower, I had a terrible nightmare. On top of that, it’s me getting chased by the Flower’s Guardian. I’m the victim here.”

Torogai raised her eyebrows. “You had a nightmare there?”

“I did tell you that until recently I went there every night, right? I watched the Flower grow a little bit each time, and it was always a good dream. But lately, that dream started to slowly turn into a nightmare. Now I’m just too scared to go back there. Maybe it’s been like that since around when the first Dreams came over and started pollinating. The Flower’s Keeper stopped being like my father. This might sound weird, but it’s almost as if…” Yugno blushed.

“Did he turn into a woman all of a sudden?” Torogai’s brash way of speaking made Yugno frown in discomfort. “Not in that way. I don’t know why, but he stopped being my father and changed into my mother all of a sudden.”

Yugno pouted. “At first it wasn’t so bad. My mother died more than ten years ago, so it felt nostalgic and I was happy to see her again.”

He breathed in deeply. “But over time it got worse. Without meaning to, I started to revert in age within the dream. When I got down to about twelve years of age, that’s when it became truly terrifying.” Yugno stared at Torogai. “Why did that happen, I wonder? It felt like she was saying ‘stay here, don’t ever leave my embrace’. It felt like that world was going to take me, tiny and powerless, and swallow me whole. That’s not the kind of world it used to be. Bud, grow, flower, then eventually bear seeds and scatter. That’s how that world worked. Yet ever since that time, it started to get smaller and smaller. It was like my mother wanted to stop her baby ever leaving her side so badly that she went insane, embraced it too hard, and

crushed it to death. I became utterly terrified. So I shook off my mother's hands and ran away."

"Oh, that's what was happening that one time.. You were moaning in your sleep quite a bit…" Balsa mumbled and Yugno nodded in response. "If Miss Balsa hadn't shaken me awake, I might have not gotten away. I was incredibly scared, and since then I've been sleeping with a small shaving knife strapped to my forehead so I don't have to go there again. It's like a charm. Mom told me about it when I was small. My *real* mother wasn't the kind of woman who would crush a baby like that."

After Yugno closed his mouth, all three of them sat in silence.

"So…" Torogai was the first to break it. "You're saying that you don't know when the pollinating finished or when the Flower will bear seeds because you haven't been there since you escaped that time."

"Basically" Yugno nodded.

Torogai sighed loudly. "I have no idea why that change occurred, but more importantly, it would seem in any case that your mother hasn't given up on you. That's why she took over Tanda and made him go after you."

Yugno started shaking. "Yes. I never thought she would come after me in this world too. When I started running away, she screamed that I would never get away and that the Flower's Guardian would definitely come after me, in a terrible voice. She shouted that he would crush my throat so that I could never sing again."

Torogai narrowed her eyes at that. "She really said that?"

"Yes. If there's one thing I'm certain of, it's my ears." He watched Torogai rub her chin, before asking curiously. "Is that important for something?"

"Hmmm. Well, anyway, it would seem that the Flower has become a terrifying, overbearing mother that won't allow anyone to leave her side. It's possible that the Flower is being influenced by the emotions of one of the Dreams it has attracted. For example, someone who wants to die and

take a lot of people with them…" After saying that, Torogai scratched her head. "Well, shit! I don't know who did what to the Flower, but if one thing is certain, it's that that idiot Tanda got tricked by someone. Damn that soft-hearted fool!"

Balsa said lowly. "Master Torogai, isn't there some way to save Tanda? It seems that somehow he went to that world. Is it possible for you to go in after him?"

Torogai scrunched her face into a ball of wrinkles. "That's exactly why I called him an idiot earlier! It's easy to get *in*. Master Norugai got in and woke me up over there that one time. But, then, the Flower needed to send this guy to this world, so it obviously needed to return me as well. The circumstances are completely different now. I couldn't possibly go in there, all alone, and try to take away the souls that that world is holding onto so tightly. I would be one tiny bird against the whole flock."

"What if I went with you then?"

Torogai shook her head with an expression that said 'that's the problem with beginners'. "You might be a master of martial arts here, but could you win against someone who controls dreams, inside a dream?" She frowned and heaved another big sigh. "Damn that Tanda. I did tell him just how dangerous this was…"

Balsa stroked her pale face. "Even knowing that, he felt like he had to go. That's just the kind of person he is."

Their eyes met. Torogai warned Balsa quietly. "Balsa, it's sad, but Tanda's soul has been already taken over by the Flower. He's become a 'Flower's Guardian', incapable of thinking about anything other than capturing Yugno. Until he achieves his goal, he'll keep attacking him. I used the ruined magic weaving tools Tanda left behind to erect a barrier here and around the meadow, but I have no idea how long that will hold back an opponent who doesn't fear pain or death. Since all creatures are scared of fire, I used fire magic, but the fire isn't real. As soon as he realises the flames can't actually

hurt anything, they'll be useless. It's only a kind of smoke screen. So, I shouldn't need to tell you this but, next time you fight him, use the spear."

Balsa looked at Torogai for a while, but eventually twisted her mouth into a grimace. "Don't even joke about that. I'd rather give him my head than kill him." After striking the back of her neck to massage it a few times, Balsa continued. "I can try my hardest to stop him. But if a time comes where I have to choose between killing him or dying, I will choose to die. Take care of the rest."

She stood up after spitting those words out.

"Don't leave the meadow." Torogai called after Balsa.

Yugno whispered to Torogai after Balsa left. "What kind of relationship do those two have?"

"Tanda is a strange fellow and he has been in love with Balsa since he was really young. I couldn't guess what Balsa thinks, though."

"Huh? Didn't she just say she would rather die than kill him?" Having said that, Yugno laughed slightly. "If she wasn't completely in love, she wouldn't say that, right?"

Torogai scowled. "You like juicy stories like that, don't you?"

"If I didn't like stories like that, I couldn't sing such fabulous love songs."

Torogai looked piercingly at Yugno, as if he were some mystical creature. "You're nothing like the son that I imagined."

Yugno laughed brightly. "That's life for you! I've travelled for many long years, but I have yet to see a son who grew up according to his mother's hopes and dreams."

Torogai snickered, then turned her face to where Balsa had left the room. "Did Balsa tell you about herself?"

"No. Only that she's Kanbalese, and a bodyguard."

“I see. Since you might be placing your life in her hands soon, I’ll tell you a bit about her. Balsa has suffered a terrible life. To avenge her parents’ death, she trained at the risk of her own life, since she was about ten. But by the time she became an adult, all those responsible were already dead. On top of losing her purpose, the man who saved her and raised her killed eight pursuers, his former friends, to protect her, and then ended his miserable life in sickness and pain.” Torogai sighed. “That’s why deep in her heart, she treats her life as something given to her by others. Something bought with the blood of others. And whether it’s love or something else, the person that is dearest to her in this world is Tanda. That’s why she’s not just saying that. She would never take his life to protect her own. That’s why, at this rate, she might really die at his hands.”

Yugno looked thoroughly disheartened. “So when push comes to shove, you’re saying she’s gonna leave me to die.”

Torogai smiled an evil smile. “Who knows. More importantly, don’t just rely on Balsa. Try protecting yourself with your own two hands as well.”

As soon as Balsa closed the door behind her and stepped into the meadow, she carefully looked around. She could just about sense something lurking in the southern grove, so she sat down on the grass, facing it. As the day came to an end the setting sun passed through the gaps in the trees and lengthened the shadows in the meadow.

Did he manage to set his shoulder back in place?

It was in this very grove that Balsa had practiced martial arts with her step father, Jiguro. She dislocated her shoulder with a failed roll here once. Tolerating the incredible pain, she set her dislocated shoulder in place herself, crying a river of tears and trembling all over. Tanda, standing to the side and watching, cried with her the entire time.

He was a crybaby. It wasn’t because he was a weakling. He would cry not only for the humans, but for the birds, the wild animals and even the bugs.

He could have gone back inside anytime if watching Balsa was hard for him, but he always stood there and looked.

I'll definitely turn you back to how you were.

Balsa promised him that in her heart.

It was going to be night soon, and in the mountains the nights were cold, even in early summer. Even if he didn't feel the cold, Tanda's body would weaken like this. Balsa also knew, all too well, that his moves earlier were too much for his body to handle. Pain is the body's way of signalling its limits. Its way of saying that going any further will have consequences. Without feeling any pain, Tanda would continue to wear out his body, and eventually exert himself to the point of destruction.

I've gotta make my move as soon as I can.

To be a bodyguard, just being strong was not enough. The ability to figure out what would happen next was invaluable. All plans had to be based on knowing exactly what allies and enemies were capable of. That's the kind of knowledge Balsa had acquired from her decades of experience.

Suddenly noticing a human's presence, Balsa snapped out of her thoughts. The sun had long since set, and the meadow was bathed in blue shadows.

Three people… no, four people.

Having figured that out, Balsa grabbed her spear and stood up. After a while, four men carrying torches pushed through the vegetation and stepped into the meadow. Balsa remembered seeing three of them before; Tanda's brothers, two older and one younger. The fourth one might have been Tanda's brother-in-law, or something.

The men looked at Balsa with nervous expressions as the oldest, Nosil, stepped forwards. "Miss Balsa, was it? We've come to see Tanda. Is he at home?"

"Mr Nosil, was it? Unfortunately, Tanda is out at the moment."

Nosil's face grew grim. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Torogai stepping out of the house. The men's nervousness reached a whole new level. "Good evening, Mr Nosil."

Torogai walked across and stood next to Balsa. Nosil licked his lips and tried speaking again. "We've come to see Tanda. Where is he?"

"It's a bit complicated, you see. I know you're worried, but let us not talk out here. Come in and we can talk over some tea."

Nosil shook his head. "We didn't come for a chat. I'm frankly worried about what you'd need to hide from us, and I'm pretty sure none of us feel like tea right now."

The second oldest brother panicked at Nosil's rudeness and grabbed his arm. "That was too much, Nosil. We don't even know what's happening, so don't start picking a fight just yet!"

Nosil shook off his brother's arm. "You fucking idiot! My family saw a monster jump out through our roof! And it looked a lot like Tanda! In the next village over there is a girl that won't wake up, just like Kaya! If we don't get things straight now, when will we?! Miss Torogai, you're supposed to be some big shot magic weaver, ain't you? Then why haven't you saved my daughter? People are starting to talk. Not just here, in other villages too. Some think that you're an evil magic weaver, going around stealing people's souls."

Torogai took a step closer and spoke with a calm expression. "You really think I would do something like that? Me and your family aren't that close, true, but for the past twenty years it was me who raised Tanda. We've been curing you villagers of your illnesses for a long time now. You always thanked us at the time, but I see that gratitude is easily forgotten in the face of mere rumours."

Blood slowly rose to Nosil's face. "But you didn't do anything for my daughter, did you? You only examined her a little…"

Torogai sighed. “Let’s speak honestly then. We’re all family here, but keep this to yourselves. Kaya isn’t just ‘not waking up’. Her soul has been taken away.”

The men stirred as Torogai continued. “Just like Tanda said, it’s not a curse. Tanda was worried about you so he didn’t say anything, but Kaya’s soul has been taken by a monster. I didn’t do anything because if I did it wrong, there was a danger that I’d attract the monster to myself as well.”

Nosil’s face stiffened. “Then, Tanda…”

“Yes. Just as you well know, Tanda is a kind man. He ignored my warning about the dangers involved and tried to save Kaya by going after her soul. That’s how he was caught by the monster. What your wife saw was Tanda's body, taken over by that monster, coming over here.”

The men stood there as if frozen, the information too much for them. “Then what are we supposed to do?” Nosil more groaned than asked.

Torogai shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe it will all work out, maybe not… either way, we’re now desperately trying to come up with a way to save Tanda and Kaya. Whether you believe me or not, is your own choice, but we are doing all we can to save those two.”

Balsa, silent until now, also spoke. “And whether you believe us or not, you know that Master Torogai is the only one who can do anything about it around here.”

Tanda’s second oldest brother stood by Nosil’s side. “We’re sorry for the terrible way we spoke to you. We’re just worried about Kaya and Tanda and couldn’t take it anymore. The village is full of rumours too…”

Torogai snorted. “I know that they look at you with contempt as ones related to a magic weaver, but you’ll have to deal with that on your own. The problems of the village are for the villagers to solve. Our opponent is the monster.”

Tanda's brothers looked at each other. Eventually they asked Torogai, speaking in unison, to save Tanda and Kaya, then returned to the village with stony, dark expressions.

Once the men were gone, Balsa looked at Torogai. "As expected of Master Torogai. I was wondering how you would explain that, but you managed. Anyway, it looks to me like living in a village is not so easy."

Torogai smiled faintly. "In return, when something happens there is a circle of people who will support you. I was one of them until I was twenty, so I know how reassuring that can be. Freaks like us can do what we want from day to day, but don't have any such support. If something happens, as you saw, we're the first to be doubted and, eventually, hated."

Chapter 3 Part 1

Oto the archivist

Shuga was walking down the dark corridors towards the stellar map storehouse in the northern, isolated part of the Star Palace. When Torogai suggested that he combine the arts of Tendo and magic weaving, he was annoyed at the frivolity of the idea given the urgency of the situation. However, when he calmed down and thought about it a little, a certain man's face came to mind.

In the Star Palace there were about thirty Star Readers. Every four years, a hundred boys from all over the country gathered to take the Trial of the Stars, but only about ten of those became trainees each time. Out of the trainees, those who became fully-fledged Star Readers following further training were even fewer. To become a Star Reader you needed to study for at least ten years. For some, it took as long as thirty.

The man Shuga had in mind was one such example of taking thirty years. He was plump and didn't stand out. His duties involved overseeing the archives of old stellar maps. He was shy enough that seeing him talk to anyone was almost unheard of, but Shuga was very interested in the stories the man sometimes let slip. Being seriously listened to seemed to be enjoyable for the man, meaning that he could occasionally be persuaded to reveal some of his thoughts to Shuga.

When Shuga opened the large, heavy doors to the stellar map storehouse, he could smell the characteristic scent of old paper in the cold air. The storehouse was always dark, since there were only four long but thin windows in the room, in order to avoid the sun damaging the paper. Amongst the light of the descending sun, shelves full to the ceiling with overlapping scrolls were sleeping.

"Mr Oto, please can you come out?" Shuga's voice echoed slightly inside the storehouse. A shadow appeared from behind the shelf on Shuga's right.

"Oh. Hello, Mr Shuga." Oto, the archivist, put away the scroll he was holding, wiped both of his hands on his clothes, and came towards Shuga.

To Shuga's question of "Are you busy now?" he responded with "No, no. Were you looking for something?"

Shuga looked around the store as if searching for something. "Is there anyone other than us in the storehouse right now?"

Oto's face took an uncertain turn. "Yes, two trainees are cleaning. If it's something you don't want others to hear then we should go to my private room."

Shuga followed Oto and entered a tiny room at the back of the storehouse. It was mostly occupied by a desk for placing stellar maps on, leaving only just enough room for a tiny shelf with the items necessary for brewing tea. The room was spotless; not even a speck of dust in sight. It spoke volumes of Oto's personality.

Only after looking out of the window, to check that no one was there, did Oto offer Shuga a chair to sit on. Shuga looked at him and spoke. “I’ve come today to ask you about the results of your research.”

Oto blinked. “Huh? Mr Shuga, I don’t have any proper results…”

“A while back, you spoke of the mysterious coincidences present in our long history.”

Oto turned red. “Oh, that. That’s more like playing around than proper research with results and things…”

Shuga leaned forward and lowered his voice. “If I recall correctly, you noticed something about the time when the Crown Prince defeated the water spirit. Last time I did not have the time to listen to you properly, but the circumstances in which I presently find myself may mean that I need to know more about that.”

Fear showed on Oto’s face. “But, Mr Shuga…”

“Please, trust me, Mr Oto. We all fear speaking about the legend of the Emperor needlessly, but I will not do anything that would cause you trouble.”

Oto looked lost for a while, but he started muttering his story after a while. “On the day of the summer solstice, when I found out that the Crown Prince had defeated the water demon, I remembered that our holy father, Emperor Torugaru, similarly defeated a water demon. I looked at the old stellar map for the summer solstice of two hundred years ago and looked for similarities.”

He paused for breath and continued. “At first the Portent of Dryness, signifying the coming of drought, was the only thing that seemed similar, but as I looked more carefully I started to notice that some of the other omens matched up as well.”

“That got me a bit flustered, so I went and looked up the map from the summer solstice from a hundred years ago and, even there, the same

omens matched up. But we are talking about the same solstice, but a neat hundred years earlier, so I thought it was obvious that they would be similar."

As he continued his story, Oto's eyes became more and more lively. "But it only got more fun after this. When I found the spare time, I would choose some intervals like ten or eight years and compare the stellar maps for the summer and winter solstices. Overlaying the daily maps from the past year or two and tracking the movement of the omens is the duty of Star Readers. Compared to that, jumping around and comparing different years and times however I wished, is nothing more than playing. I've told you all this because you always listen to my nonsense willingly, but…"

Oto smiled wryly. "While playing like this, I feel that I noticed something mysterious. Before, I told you of the similarity of the omens on the summer solstices a hundred years apart, but if we allow for small differences in shapes and times, I feel like the similarities only deepen. But, well, I was trying to find things that looked similar, so I might have just been seeing things that I wanted to see."

Shuga wasn't looking at Oto, despite sitting right in front of him. His entire attention was being held captive by a strange premonition that, with this clue, he was on the verge of a great discovery. Despite being the first to find this clue, Oto didn't notice that it could lead to a discovery that would overturn Tendo itself, nor did he have the knowledge to develop this idea to such an extent. However, Shuga did have that knowledge.

"Mr Shuga?" Oto looked more closely at Shuga's face, having noticed his strange state of mind. Shuga suddenly returned to himself. "Mr Oto, are there omen similarities like that this year as well?"

Oto grinned broadly, as if to say 'that's the question I was waiting for'. "It was precisely because I started noticing the similarities this year that I talked to you about this a while ago. Wait a second, please."

Oto stood up, went back to the main part of the storehouse, and eventually returned with his hands full of scrolls. Shuga caught the two topmost scrolls

before they fell from the stack.

“Thank you.” Oto absentmindedly responded, while spreading out a lot of stellar maps on the desk before beginning his explanation. Shuga lost himself in confirming each of those explanations. They only stopped once the sun had long since set, making it too dark to read.

Shuga took Oto’s hands and thanked him from the heart. “Mr Oto. You’ve been calling it playing, but this might end up being a great discovery.”

Oto laughed, embarrassed. “You’re exaggerating. For a Star Reader this was definitely an excellent game, but it’s best not to expect too much. It will surely not amount to much in terms of results.”

As he parted ways with Oto and returned to his own chambers, Shuga felt a strong sense of excitement. To Oto, who knew nothing outside of Tendo, they just seemed like interesting similarities. However, to Shuga, who was learning the ways of the Yakoo from Torogai, they seemed like something else entirely.

Tendo stated that the world was made up of the mortal realm, the heavenly realm ruled by god and the demon realm ruled by demons. But these realms were said to be independent, not overlapping worlds that are invisible but nonetheless influence one another, as in Yakoo lore.

If what Torogai said was true, then many other worlds overlapped with this one. And if other worlds continuously moved apart and came back together, just like that time when Crown Prince Chagum became host to a spirit from another world before birthing it into this one...

The similarities between omens that Oto showed him today reminded Shuga of the junction between two sea currents. The same similarities were observed every eight years, but also every hundred years. Oto laughed and thought that it was a coincidence and only happened to look meaningful. If, however, it was assumed that not just two currents were meeting, but many, a pattern like that would arise.

In Shuga's heart a magnificent map was unfurling. A map that showed worlds approaching each other, then moving away again, just as stars in the night sky do.

The omens being exactly the same a year ago, when Sagu and Nayugu approached each other, as they were a hundred years ago, made sense. However, the star maps of the year similar to the present that Oto had shown him did seem to match, but were not exactly the same.

Did this year's differences have anything to do with the Flower blooming and inviting Dreams to the Flower's world? The information he would need to ascertain that was sorely lacking. To prove this new idea that he had just come up with, he would need a lot of trial and error. Having realised this, Shuga's excitement dampened. Nevertheless, somewhere deep in his heart, a strange excitement did take root. His curiosity would surely become the strength he would need for the necessary drawn out trial and error.

'Torogai was right', thought Shuga. Something not useful straight away is not at all in vain. In fact, this impulse to pursue things that might not be useful for a very long time, if ever, was surely the path that led people to huge new discoveries.

This is my dream, isn't it.

While thinking such thoughts, and smiling to himself, Shuga traversed the dark corridors back to his chambers.

Chapter 3 Part 2

Chagum and Tanda

Tanda slowly recreated his own sensations by dreaming of his body.

While the Flower's Keeper was chanting the last of his spells, Tanda cast a spell of his own to protect his dreams. That's how he managed to retain his soul, which would have otherwise completely belonged to the Flower by now.

Nevertheless, when his body was taken over by the Flower, the thread connecting his life and his soul was severed, leaving him with no method of returning to it. Tanda bitterly realised that he did indeed walk straight into a trap after all.

Just before the last spell took hold, when that wind came out of nowhere to caress his cheek, Tanda saw a white shadow shaped like a woman behind the Flower's Keeper. In that split second, like lightning, the feelings of that woman pierced him. On the surface, feelings of wanting to forever doze inside this dream, never to wake up. Beneath that, feelings of viscous loathing, wanting to melt all other dreams into one never-ending dream so that someone else would taste the same despair.

Tanda sighed.

That woman is surely one of those that pollinated the Flower, and now the strong feelings of her soul are controlling it.

That's what caused the Flower's Keeper to set such a trap for Tanda. He didn't know what her goal was, but it definitely involved his body back in the other world.

A beautiful colour, sweet nectar, and various means of deceiving insects are all parts of the nature the Flower was bestowed with. I really am a soft-hearted fool to fall for something like this. But…

Tanda had a reassuring thought.

Even a tiny insect can achieve something.

Tanda protected his soul with that last spell. While this did not change the fact that he was stuck inside the Flower, it did mean that he was the only soul there which was not trapped in its own dream. He stood up and glanced at the faintly glowing mist above him.

On each and every petal, a Dream was sleeping. It would be best if he could wake all of them at once, but then he would be noticed by the Flower's Keeper.

This was the Flower's world. If it came to a fight, Tanda alone would stand no chance.

Anyway, I should start by looking for Kaya.

Kaya would surely believe his words and wake up.

Tanda changed his shape to that of a bird, beat his wings once and flew upwards. While looking for Kaya amongst the petals, he found a very familiar dream. Or, to be more precise, someone was dreaming of Tanda, and he got sucked into that dream.

Before he realised what was going on, Tanda found himself by the sunken hearth in his own home. It was subtly different to the way his house looked now. The room was neither this bright nor this spacious, and a vase that he had used for herbal potions, which he had knocked over and broken at some point, was still standing, intact, next to the shelves.

It wasn't early summer, as it should have been, either. Tanda noticed that he was holding a type of mushroom called *kankui* that only grew in the

autumn. Balsa was sitting on the other side of the hearth, and Torogai was rudely lying by the fire. He himself was talking to…

“Chagum!” Chagum looked up with surprise in his eyes at Tanda’s shout.

“What?”

Tanda dropped the *kankui* and grabbed Chagum’s shoulders. “Oh, no! You got caught up in this mess too?”
Chagum scowled. “Mess? What’s wrong Tanda? What are you talking about?”

Tanda looked at the scenery of Chagum’s dream properly and his chest hurt. The time that Chagum wanted to go back to, that he missed so much that he let the Flower take him, was that autumn he spent at Tanda’s house with Balsa and Torogai.

He hugged Chagum and slowly started speaking. “Chagum, listen well. This is a dream.”

Tanda described from beginning to end how he came to be here, explaining the nature of the Flower as well as its trap. Understandably, Chagum’s body reacted to this by becoming rigid and tense. After Tanda’s explanation, Chagum twisted away and shook his head. “No! I don’t ever want to return! I don’t want to have to become the Mikado!”

Chagum glared at Tanda. “Such a life would be so much worse! If I am to be trapped regardless, then I’d rather it be in this dream than in the Palace.”

Tanda looked straight at Chagum. “Is that so? Can you so easily accept the way you are now, sleeping your life away and trapped within a dream?”
Chagum winced slightly as Tanda continued. “If you really don’t mind dying a peaceful death in this pleasant dream, then by all means go ahead and do just that.”

Tanda removed his arms from around Chagum. “But if you feel at all like you would regret staying here, even the tiniest bit, then I think you should go back.”

Tanda looked at the other Dreams, faintly visible through the bright, translucent mist. “People gather here because they think of themselves as unhappy. There are most likely two types. The first type consists of those

who find themselves with nowhere to turn. For example, they may have an incurable disease, or they may have done something terrible which they feel they can't make amends for. The other type consists of those who find themselves stuck living a different kind of life than they would like. They curse their fate and refuse to accept their situation, not understanding why they must be so unhappy."

Tanda returned his eyes to Chagum. "What is a 'different kind of life', Chagum? I don't know about the others here, but in your case, not all hope is lost! If you wanted it, both me and Balsa would help you escape to another country or something even if it cost our lives. A year ago, I thought that you understood this, but you chose to instead give this kind of life a try. You faced the dark fate of becoming the Mikado, and shouldered your loneliness with your head held high. You wanted to be proud of your choices, right?"

Tanda let out a small sigh. "I think it's pretty important for all people, from the lowest peasant all the way up to the Mikado, to be able to feel proud of themselves. It's pretty hard to achieve, and it involves coming to terms with feelings so private and embarrassing that you can't share them with anyone. At least, that's what I've been trying to do as I live my life. Whenever I find myself at a crossroads and I don't know what to do, I always try to choose the road that will lead me closer to my ideal self."

Chagum was gritting his teeth. Tanda took his hand. "In any case, the final decision is yours. At least that much is fair, right?"

Chagum nodded his head slightly.

"We're inside an empty dream. Do you still think you can continue sleeping until you die, surrounded by your self-created illusions of Balsa, me and Master Torogai, now that you are aware that this is all a dream? Chagum closed his eyes and started trembling slightly, but Tandy pushed on. "Or, will you wake up and live your life till the end no matter what struggles you face? If so, I will tell you how to get out of here."

After taking a deep breath and expelling it, Chagum raised his eyes and looked straight at Tanda. Tanda smiled. “Ok. Look here. Can you see these white, glowing threads?”

Tanda pointed at the thread extending from Chagum’s forehead. Chagum looked at it with surprise. “I can see it. Though I didn’t notice it before...”

“In the world of souls, you can’t see anything until you explicitly notice it. That is the way of magic weaving, you see.” Tanda laughed. “The other end of this thread is connected to your real body. If you follow it, you will definitely be able to return. But, there’s one very important thing I must warn you of.” His face stiffened and he grabbed Chagum by the shoulders. “No matter what you see or hear, whatever happens, do not turn around. This is really important. Do not turn around for anything. Remember, anything you might see or hear is just an illusion made by the Flower to tempt you. Do you understand? Promise me!”

Chagum pressed his lips together tightly and nodded. Tanda let go of his shoulders in relief. “Also, when you’re back, I want you to give Master Torogai a message. Tell her that the wind that will scatter the Flower’s petals will come from her world in three days’ time, during the night of the half-moon. If she is thinking of doing the Soul Call, that will be the last opportunity.”

“I understand. The night of the half moon, three days from now, was it?”

“Yes. Please tell Shuga about this. He can meet with Torogai in secret. He is a smart man and I believe that he will definitely convey this properly.” Chagum nodded vigorously as Tanda continued explaining. “It will be helpful for her to know this. If she knows the place that the wind will blow from, and where the two worlds are connected, the Soul Call should be easier for her.”

Chagum narrowed his eyes at Tanda’s words. “Tanda, wait.”

“Yes?”

“When I was invited here, I think I saw something strange. I was dreaming of being at your fireplace, but you know how dreams can sometimes suddenly change location? It was like that. For a while, I thought that I could see something like a palace.”
“That’s what this place actually looks like, probably. I told you, didn’t I? The Flower is blooming in a garden inside an empty palace.”

“Yes. The thing is, this palace looks really similar to the royal mountain villa.”

Tanda looked at Chagum’s surprised face. “Is that right? Now that you mention it, I did hear that the mountain villa was built on the bank of a lake…”

“Yes. It looks just like it. I go there with Mother and her attendants every summer. I wouldn’t mistake it for anything. Also…” Excitement transformed Chagum’s face. “Kokoru, who used to teach me before, said that the previous Mikado, Yamur, built the mountain villa about fifty years ago. It was built there because the Second Queen at the time, who had just lost her son, had a very sad but beautiful dream and asked the Mikado to build a palace just like the one in her dream in memory of her son. In the dream, she followed a singing voice across the Aoyumi River to a palace on the bank of a beautiful lake surrounded by mountains. This was investigated, and a lake just like the one in the Queen’s dream was found. And so they built a mountain villa there.”

Tanda’s eyes sparkled. “There is no mistaking it. We know that Master Torogai was not the only one called by the Flower. She told me that the others, who the Flower’s Keeper didn’t fall in love with, left without ever entering the palace. The Second Queen of Mikado Yamur must have been one such individual. I’d love to see the face Master Torogai will pull when she hears this! Anyway, Chagum, please tell Shuga everything you just told me too.”

Feeling like a small load had been taken off of his shoulders, Tanda let out a sigh. “I didn’t think you’d be one of the invited ones, Chagum. Was the song really that beautiful?”

Chagum laughed a little in embarrassment. “Yeah. The words were just a love song, but the melody… I don’t know how to describe it. It was a melody that clawed at my heart and stirred up the things hiding deep within. The first time I heard it, my chest hurt, but I told myself to calm down and managed to contain my emotions.”

He continued after a pause. “But when I heard about you guys from Shuga, I remembered all that stuff and I couldn’t bear it anymore.”

Chagum was trying his best to explain how he felt when he found out that Shuga was meeting Master Torogai in secret. “Then, when I went to sleep while feeling like that, I could hear a woman’s voice calling me. The voice was kind, and when I looked its way I saw a very nostalgic and fiery light. When I woke up, I was here…”

Tanda scowled. “A woman’s voice?”

Chagum nodded, then suddenly turned pale in fright. “Oh! Then that was the voice of the First Queen. Speaking of which, she has been asleep for quite a while already.”

Tanda shuddered as he remembered the white face of the woman he saw behind the Flower’s Keeper.

Chagum collected himself and spoke again. “After losing Sagum to an illness, the First Queen couldn’t overcome her sadness and locked herself up in the mountain villa. But, six days ago, she fell asleep and wouldn’t wake up…”

Tanda was gripped by a terrifying thought while listening to Chagum’s whispers.

Since the son of the First Queen passed away, Chagum, the Second Queen’s son, became the Crown Prince. The First Queen didn’t just lose a son; she was going to be the mother of the next Mikado, the very highest position a woman in this kingdom could attain. That bright future was suddenly taken from her along with her son. All that was left for her now was to watch over the son of the Second Queen. To watch *him* become the Mikado instead.

Tanda remembered the feelings of the woman standing behind the Flower's Keeper. She wanted to remain dreaming forever, to never wake up, and had a feverishly hatred-filled desire for others to suffer the same sadness as her.

Tanda paled.

Suddenly, the scent of the Flower thickened significantly. Chagum was soon enveloped completely by it and his eyes began to droop.

This is bad…

There was no doubt, then, that the First Queen had been listening in on everything so far. As soon as it was clear that Tanda was aware of her, she attempted to control Chagum without hesitation!

Tanda put his hands together and concentrated. He took a deep breath of air and then released it slowly, changing it into a white mist to surround Chagum and himself.

Tanda placed his hands on either side of Chagum's face and continued to exhale towards him, waking him from his trance abruptly, with a shock as if cold water had been poured all over him.

"What is all this?" Chagum let his eyes open and moved away from the forming wall of mist. Tanda extended his hand and pulled Chagum into a tight hug. Outside the wall of mist, a human form could be seen writhing around, their voice resounding in a drawn out moan, filled with an obvious and terrifying hatred.

The wall was being pushed against from the outside, but it didn't budge in the slightest.

"Don't worry. This is a barrier I created. I'm not like the souls sleeping in the Flower. At the last moment, when the last spell was being cast on me, I managed to protect my soul. My barrier will not be broken so easily."

The strength of the barrier was the strength of the soul that formed it. Tanda thought to himself with determination that he would protect this

barrier no matter what.

“Tanda, what happened? Whose voice is that?”

“The First Queen woke up. She most likely wanted to bring you here to drag you down with her. Your heart was in a state that made it easy for her to do so. Now that she has you within her grasp, she isn’t going to just let you go.”

Chagum frowned. “But the First Queen is a kind person. I haven’t met her too many times but she was always beautiful and gentle, an ephemeral flower. I just can’t see her as someone who could curse others like this…”

Tanda smiled. Chagum was a stubborn child, but at times like these you could see his kindness shining through. “Is that so? I think everyone feels some resentment when they are hurt. Kindness is unrelated. Also, in dreams, people’s feelings become embarrassingly frank, right?”

Tanda continued after looking at Chagum. “I’m not saying that she’s a bad person. I’m saying that this is a place where the darkness we all hold deep within our hearts is brought to the surface and exposed. Either way, it’s good that we noticed the First Queen before I sent you back. If we didn’t, you would have surely been caught in a trap along the way. She is very cunning. I was almost completely fooled as well.”

Tanda smiled bitterly. “My barrier lets us hear sounds from the outside, but our voices and bodies are still concealed. Listen well, Chagum. To escape from here safely you must change your shape. Not to fool the First Queen, though. She won’t be fooled so easily. What you really want to do is to draw out the full power of your soul. The shape of a soul shows its nature. If the shape is human, then you can only run as fast as a human, but if you take the form of a bird, you move with a bird’s speed too.”

“What if I become an arrow then?”

Tanda smiled slightly. “It’s the fastest at the time of release, but it has no power of its own to fly with after that, so it will not be enough. I’ll have you change into a falcon now, so fly as fast as you can. Follow the thread closely

and do not turn around. The First Queen will most likely try to trick you, but do not turn around no matter what she tries."

Tanda grabbed Chagum's shoulders and squeezed. "You were invited here because your heart wanted to come here. The Flower has a lot of power over you because of this. But, listen well. It still shouldn't have enough power to stop a soul that has decided to return to its body. If you don't show any uncertainty, you should be able to return. Don't stray. If you get lost, you'll be dragged back."

Chagum's face stiffened. "By the First Queen?"

"No. By your own heart." Tanda gazed at Chagum. "Isn't it strange? People can want to just sleep forever, or even choose death, despite being alive and well. Why do people have souls too big for their bodies?"

Chagum inhaled sharply. His voice trembled. "This Flower is a cruel being, isn't it Tanda? Using people's hopes and dreams, making them feel like this… I could only cope by entering this dream."

Tanda hugged Chagum. Chagum buried his face in Tanda's chest and sobbed. "Tanda. I feel bad for the first Queen. She was surely in so much pain that it was hard to even breathe. It's not her fault."

"But her dream became a true nightmare when she ensnared you in it, it would seem. The moment she wished that she could hold you here, lock you up forever, dragging you down with her, the sadness turned into resentment. It's not really directed at you. She probably resents her fate. 'Why is it just me?' The Second Queen has you, and you will become the Mikado eventually. She envies the Second Queen so much… But the kind First Queen didn't want to think such thoughts, she punished herself for it. In the dream though, her deep-seated resentment cannot be held back."

And, unfortunately, that resentment gained control over the Flower, as troublesome as that is…

Tanda added to himself. He remembered the brilliance of the plan that fooled him into giving up control of his body, and felt that something didn't

quite fit.

If the Flower can be taken over by the invited souls in this way, then how did it survive this long? There must have been other souls that wished to end the world and drag other souls into death with them.

In fact, all the souls that were invited over by the Flower should have been so strongly disillusioned with their current lives that they wanted to escape from it. If there wasn't some power protecting the Flower from souls like these, that wanted to die, then the Flower would never have been able to disperse its seeds and repeat the cycle. It would have died out long ago.

Tanda shook his head. This was not the time to be thinking these thoughts. "Anyway, we need to release you from the First Queen's nightmare as soon as possible. For the sake of the other dreams that are trapped here too."

Chagum pressed his lips and nodded in determination.

Filled with Chagum's courage, Tanda reflexively put his hands on Chagum's cheeks once more. "If you ever lose your way, remember that me and Balsa think of you as our son, even if we share no blood and we vary greatly in status. We want you to be well." Tanda continued after a pause. "Your power to fly is the same as your will to live. Fly! Cut through pain and darkness. You have the strength to do that. Both me and Balsa know you have what it takes."

Tears welled up in Chagum's eyes. Tanda clapped him on the back and helped him stand up. Desperately trying to reign in his tears, Chagum asked a question. "What will you do, Tanda?"

"I can't go back. I let the Flower take over my body, you see."

Seeing Chagum's screwed up face, Tanda laughed. "Silly. Don't make that face. I only have my own inexperience to blame. If Master Torogai finds out, she's going to turn me into a turtle. That's how bad I messed up. I guess I got what was coming to me."

Chagum paused for a second before answering. “Torogai or Balsa will definitely come and save you.”

“Yeah. As pathetic as it may be, that’s what I’m hoping for at this point too.” He replied as he was getting to his feet. His face returned to being serious and he placed both his hands on Chagum’s head. “Anyway, close your eyes and calm your heart. You’ll feel a warm light in your chest… Do you feel it? It’s warm, isn’t it? That heat is slowly changing you. Both of your arms are becoming wings, aren’t they? Dream of a beautiful, strong falcon. Just like that. Try spreading your wings now!”

While releasing warm light similar to that of a firefly, Chagum’s shape changed slowly. Tanda grabbed the warm falcon with both hands and threw it up into the air. “Fly straight back home! Fly with the wind in your face!”

After pausing for a second, just beating his wings in place, Chagum rode an incoming wind and rose up high. He left the mist farther and farther behind him. As he rode the wind, as he felt it gently blowing on his face, he heard a voice from behind. “Wait! Chagum, wait!”

It was Tanda’s voice. Chagum almost turned without thinking, but stopped himself in time. Even if Tanda did forget to tell him something, the risk was not worth it.

The mist started swirling, and he saw visions of times long past. The grand hall of the Yogo Palace. A blushing Sagum stood before his father, wearing his golden crown. Sagum stepped forward onto a pure-white woollen rug and his father placed a cape weaved with golden thread on his shoulders, signifying that he was now the Crown Prince. The thread caught the afternoon light and shone brilliantly. Sagum smiled widely enough to show his teeth.

Chagum’s chest was pierced by a sharp sadness. He didn’t speak with Sagum all that much. He didn’t feel like they were really brothers, either. What saddened him so was the unreasonable transience of life.

Sagum probably didn’t think at the time that in just less than a year he would no longer be alive. He must have thought that he was going to

continue maturing as a Crown Prince, until one day he would put on the Mikado's crown.

Why did he have to die, leaving me to become the Crown Prince. I don't even want to.

Chagum thought that destiny was a cruel thing.

Suddenly he heard a thin voice. "Why did Sagum have to die? Even though he wanted to become the Mikado…"

He felt like someone had ripped his chest open with claws.

"Why did he, who wanted to live, have to die, while you who would rather die than be the Mikado, have to live? After you return to the palace will you be able to live out those cold days, insipid as sand? What have you even got to look forward to?"

Chagum's wings moved as if they were made of lead. It was true. There was not exactly an enjoyable life waiting for him upon his return. As soon as he thought that, he was plagued by an unbearable exhaustion.

How nice would it feel to stop beating these wings and sleep for a bit… Maybe the First Queen's sadness would lessen then. Her hatred of me would disappear as well.

At that moment, a wind from the East caressed Chagum's cheek. With it, Tanda's voice resounded in his ears with surprising strength. *"If you ever lose your way, remember that me and Balsa think of you as our son, even if we share no blood and we vary greatly in status. We want you to be well."*

It felt like light was shining within his eyeballs.

"Your power to fly is the same as your will to live. Fly! Cut through pain and darkness. You have the strength to do that. Both me and Balsa know you have what it takes."

An image of Balsa appeared in front of his eyes. She stood in front of him protectively, pointing her spear at the terrifying monster, Rarunga. She was

willing to put her life on the line to protect a child that wasn't even hers.

Balsa has also had many things stolen from her. Her parents, a normal life. But Balsa would never run away into a dream like this. Even if she wanted to do so, she never would.

From deep within his heart, Chagum felt hot power welling up. He beat his wings strongly and felt his body rising on the wind. For the first time ever he felt that his life, in all its transience, that could be taken away at any point, was nevertheless very precious.

Before his eyes the cold and vast landscape of Nayugu that he had seen as the Guardian of the Spirit stretched out. The world where life is as it is. That quiet, bare mountainscape.

Suddenly, his body felt weightless. Chagum continued to fly, following the faintly glowing thread, but he was eventually engulfed by a bright light.

As if thrown out of the dream, Chagum jumped to his feet. In the bright light of pre-noon, he gasped. The feeling of the silk nightwear on his skin told Chagum that he was awake. His heart was hammering painfully in his chest.

That was a rather strange dream.

Tanda's words were so true that it was amazing.

At the loud sound of a teacup breaking nearby, Chagum turned to look in the direction of the doorway. The young chamberlain that took care of him was standing there. "Is everything okay, Rasam?"

"Y...Your Highness…" Upon hearing Chagum's whisper, he turned on his heel and ran down the hallway shouting "His Highness has woken up!".

Chagum only found out that he had been asleep for three days after the chamberlain had shortly returned with a physician in tow. As soon as he realised that, the memories of the still-asleep First Queen, his meeting with

Shuga and his encounter with Tanda hit him with full force. “Oh no! Call Shuga immediately!”

After shouting so at his attendants, he noticed their surprise and panicked a little. He rephrased his earlier request. “Inform Star Reader Shuga that I have urgent business with him.”

For those interested:

1. Kokoru is written □□□ in katakana.
2. Yamur is written □□□ in katakana.
3. Rasam is written □□□ in katakana.

Chapter 3 Part 3

A secret meeting

Upon entering the Anything Shop from the back door at dawn and finding out from Toya that Torogai wasn't yet there, Shuga frowned in his usual manner. "Isn't this strange? Master Torogai said that she would wait here every morning, even if her trip would prove wasted."

"Yes. She said so to me as well, but… maybe something happened to her?"

"This is troubling indeed. Do you know where Master Torogai lives?"

"I know the rough area, but not the exact place. The people of the village near there will know for sure, but it might be about a *dan* away if you're lucky. It's apparently out in the middle of the mountains. I can come with you and guide you, though. What do you want to do?"

Shuga remained silent with a stiff face. Sneaking out at dawn to meet with Torogai was already rather dangerous. In about a *dan* and a half, the Morning Meeting, in which the Star Readers gather to discuss the observations of the previous night, would begin. If it became clear that he wasn't in the Star Palace to participate in this, questions of where he had been instead and what he had been up to would undoubtedly arise.

Was it still worth the risk of being punished by excommunication to save the people trapped by the Flower, now that Crown Prince Chagum had woken up? Such thoughts were floating around in Shuga's head. Besides, the night when the Flower was forecast to scatter was still two days away, from what the Crown Prince had said. "It's too bad, but I'll have to try again tomorrow. For the time being…"

He was interrupted by the unusual sound of a horse's hooves vigorously approaching the shop from the direction of the back streets. Shuga and Toya looked at each other and, in a panic, Shuga disappeared into the shop's hidden room.

He thought that it sounded like the horse had stopped right outside the Anything Shop's back entrance. When Shuga stopped breathing and strained his ears, he heard the knocking pattern that signified Torogai's arrival.

He also heard Toya's surprised voice. "Miss Balsa!"

"Sorry, Toya, but can you take care of the horse? Is the Star Reader called Shuga here?"

Shuga frowned slightly at this turn of events, but he soon opened the hidden room's trapdoor and lowered the ladder. "I'm here. Please come up."

A woman appeared at the bottom of the ladder. The sharpness of her gaze pierced him as if it were a drawn sword and he reflexively ducked back into the hidden room. The woman climbed up the ladder before Shuga could collect himself.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Balsa. Master Torogai couldn't make it, so I came in her place. Sorry, but I'm kind of in a hurry, so make this quick."

Balsa told him about Tanda being turned into the Flower's Guardian, about Yugno, and about the barrier that necessitated Torogai staying where she was. "I've heard that Chagum was also stuck in a dream. Has there been any progress?"

Shuga smiled at her brash way of asking. "Yes. That's why I wanted to meet with Master Torogai so urgently. You will be pleased to hear that the Crown Prince has woken up."

"He has? What a relief!"

“He woke up yesterday at noon, saying that he has very important information to pass on to Master Torogai. Apparently, the day after tomorrow, on the night of the half moon, that world and our world will become close and a connection will be established. The Wind will then blow in, scattering the petals of the Flower. If Master Torogai is to save the Dreams with her magic weaving, then that will be her last opportunity. He also said that the place where the Flower is actually blooming might be the lake close to the royal mountain villa.”

Balsa’s expression softened to a surprising degree. “That’s great. As expected of Chagum. He’s a strong child. I thought he would manage to return.”

Shuga suddenly remembered the kind of expression Chagum often wore when he spoke of this bodyguard. “That’s true. His Highness is indeed a person of great strength. Nevertheless, he did say that he would not have made it back if not for the help of the man who was turned into the Flower’s Guardian, if that is the correct term. I believe you said his name was Tanda?”

Balsa’s face turned utterly joyous at those words. “He was saved by Tanda? Then it’s only his body that’s been taken over! His soul is clearly still around, at least. Master Torogai said that his soul should have been taken over as well.”

“No, it would certainly seem as though his soul is just as it was. The message about the last opportunity to save the Dreams was also from Mr Tanda to Master Torogai. But… he also conveyed that he has no way of coming back.”

Shuga recollected Chagum’s whole story to Balsa. When they reached the part pertaining to the role of the First Queen, Balsa opened her eyes wide. “So that’s it…”

Shuga looked at Balsa with a puzzled expression.

“Well, you see, Master Torogai thought this was strange. Why did the ‘Flower’, or whatever, make Tanda into the Flower’s Guardian and force him

to chase after Yugno? She thought it was somewhat out of character."

"I see. I was also very interested to hear Tanda's words about souls changing shape due to thoughts, and the shape being a manifestation of their true nature…"

Shuga spoke with a sparkle in his eyes, but Balsa only nodded along absentmindedly to this tangent in the conversation, which she had no real interest in, while thinking her own thoughts.

When Shuga stopped speaking, Balsa quickly changed the topic. "Mr Shuga, can you get ahold of one of the Hunters by the name of Jin?"

The Hunters were a secret group who dealt with assassinations and other dirty jobs for the Mikado. Usually, only eight of the palace guards were appointed as Hunters at any given time. Their existence was a closely guarded secret, but Balsa had previously risked her life fighting them in order to protect Chagum. Shuga, on the other hand, found out about their existence only upon becoming the right hand of the Master Star Reader.

Through a set of strange circumstances at that time, the Hunter Jin was once saved by Tanda, and he vowed to someday repay this debt. He was a man with a good head on his shoulders and the physical abilities to match.

"I think I will be able to contact him, but why?"

"As I said before, Tanda has become the Flower's Guardian. It's terrifying; he moves like a wolf and his strength is incredible. A normal warrior would be no match for him."

After seeing Shuga nod, Balsa continued.

"But, for Master Torogai to save the souls captured by the Flower, she needs to use the magic weaving technique Soul Call at the mountain villa, and I need to be there to protect her on the way. While it is really Yugno that the Flower's Guardian is after, I couldn't just take him and escape while leaving Master Torogai alone because there's no guarantee that she won't be attacked. It would be best if all three of us go to the lake, so I can protect

them both. For this to work, though, I will need someone else to hold him off, even if just for a little while."

Balsa's brisk way of speaking reminded Shuga, once again, that the woman sitting in front of him was a formidable bodyguard.

"The real problem is trying to stop it in its tracks without killing Tanda. It can't be knocked unconscious, but I want to hurt Tanda as little as possible, especially now that I know his soul is still intact somewhere."

Balsa's expression was becoming increasingly dark. "Also, we don't know how long Master Torogai's barrier is going to last. That's why I rushed here on horseback. The owners of the stables had a rude awakening this morning as I banged on the door to rent one of their horses."

"And that's why you want Jin?"

"Yes. Jin feels indebted to Tanda, and he's pretty strong too. He would be able to hold Tanda off for a while in my place." She paused briefly. "So, I'm going to rent two horses now and get them to Yashiro Village. As soon as Jin joins us, I will guard Master Torogai and Yugno as they head to the mountain villa. When we get there, Master Torogai can set up another barrier."

Shuga listened to Balsa's plan with a stiff face, before eventually interrupting her. "Miss Balsa, there are a few problems with your plan." Balsa nodded, encouraging him to continue. "First of all Jin is, officially speaking at least, a member of the palace guard. He is thus not allowed to leave his post without the Mikado's permission. Furthermore, since we cannot be sure what will happen on that night, we should evacuate the mountain villa to be on the safe side. This would, of course, also require the Mikado's permission."

"I see…"

A small, wry smile graced Shuga's lips. "Oh, and there is one other matter I'd like to discuss. Please keep in mind that the connection between Master Torogai and myself is of the utmost secrecy. If this were to be made public, I

would be excommunicated immediately. While the current Master Star Reader is an outstanding and open-minded man, I do not think even he would forgive me this indiscretion."

Balsa gave Shuga a piercing look. "You're saying that you can't afford the risk of someone wondering why you know about this plan."

Shuga withstood her gaze without flinching. "Yes. If Crown Prince Chagum were still asleep that would be one thing, and I would have risked expulsion for his sake. Now that he is fine, however, I will not."

Balsa realised that this pleasant-seeming man was in fact quite shrewd. "You're pretty direct, aren't you…" She suddenly smiled. "Unfortunately, this puts you at a disadvantage. You see, I could expose your connection to Master Torogai any time I want. Have no doubt that I would do anything, no matter how dirty, if it means I can get Tanda back to the way he was."

They stared at each other for a while, but it was Shuga who turned his gaze away first. "Yes, it would seem that I am indeed at a disadvantage here. Well then, I will simply have to think of a way of making your plan succeed without getting myself excommunicated."

Balsa stood up after nodding. "Thanks. I'll draw you a map to the house we're staying in."

Having said that, Balsa thought of something and looked at Shuga. He opened his mouth at the same time and they spoke over each other.

"I could get His Highness to…"

After a pause, Balsa spoke again first. "How do you feel about having Chagum tell a lie for the sake of the plan?"

Shuga smiled. "Yes. I could get him to say something about receiving instructions in a dream, or something…"

"Yeah. That kid has guts, so he could definitely pull it off."

“In that case, I’d better come up with a convincing story on the way back to the Palace. All being well, Jin should arrive at your place by tomorrow morning.”

“Let’s hope that it does go well, then. For *both* our sakes.”

Balsa returned Shuga’s wry smile.

It was not long after noon when Shuga interrupted Chagum’s sky reading lessons under the pretence of urgent business. Once they were left alone in the room, in which he usually also tutored Chagum on the ways of Tendo, Shuga bent forward and whispered into Chagum’s ear, telling him the plan that he and Balsa had come up with.

“Balsa! You met with Balsa?” Chagum’s eyes shone.

“Yes. Just as in the stories Your Highness has told me, she is most certainly a rather fearsome individual of the female persuasion.”

Chagum burst into laughter without thinking, but quickly panicked and shut his mouth. “So, Balsa wants me to put on a little act to convince Father.”

Shuga nodded. “There are two main goals. Sending Jin to Balsa’s aid, and the evacuation of the mountain villa. You need to make this happen without letting anyone know that these orders come from commoners like Torogai or even Balsa.”

Excitement lit up Chagum’s eyes further. “And that’s why we’re pretending that I learned of this in that dream? In that case, it would be best if I mentioned Emperor Yamur’s Second Queen, and her dream of the mountain villa.”

Surprise appeared on Shuga’s face. “Your Highness, I also thought that such a tactic would be optimal.” Saying that, Shuga lowered his voice further and shared the story he put together with Chagum.

Chagum listened to the whole story, nodding all the way, before finishing off with one big nod. “I understand. Leave it to me. Deceiving Father with this will be child’s play.”

Shuga’s face clouded. “Your Highness, please do not underestimate the Mikado. He is fearsome, and very sharp-witted.”

A darkness was reflected in Chagum’s eyes. “Do you think I do not know that? Me, who was almost killed by him?”

“I am only making sure. Additionally, the Mikado will no doubt ask for the Master Star Reader’s counsel before passing down his judgement on the matter. To succeed, we must face and overcome the two most formidable people in this country: the Mikado, and the Master Star Reader. Please keep this in mind.”

“I will. If I can’t even do this much, then what was the point in me coming back here.”

Chagum’s face broke into a fearless smile.

Chapter 3 Part 4

Chagum's scheme

Yogo Palace was a trapezoidal structure sprawling from east to west, with its back facing north. At its center was the Mikado's Path; a realm off limits to all but those allowed by the Mikado himself.

At the southernmost point, the part closest to the city, of the Mikado's Path was a gigantic space reserved for audiences between nobles and the Mikado. To the north were the Mikado's private quarters, accessible only by those closest to the Mikado such as members of the royal family and the Star Readers.

At present, there were three people in the living room of the Mikado's private quarters. The polished, plain wooden floor was covered by a coarse and pure-white rug of the finest quality.

The Mikado was deeply embedded in his lacquered chair, inlaid with polished mother of pearl. Crown Prince Chagum faced him, kneeling formally in a low seat situated on the rug.

A Star Reader, who had been temporarily recalled from the mountain villa where he had been attending the First Queen, knelt behind and to the side of Chagum, directly upon the rug.

Chagum felt the Star Reader's gaze on his back more strongly even than the gaze of the Mikado who sat directly in his line of sight. Hibi Tonan had a body one would usually expect of a warrior, rather than a Star Reader. He was a big man with broad shoulders, his brows and facial hair bleached by the passage of time, but his eyes still shined with the kind of dignity

particular to those who have been wielding considerable power for a considerable length of time.

Chagum was vaguely aware that, last year, this man was one of those involved with both the plan to kill him and the later efforts to save him.

The Mikado spoke. “Chagum, it concerned me to hear that you would also not wake up. I am glad it was not serious.”

Chagum put both hands on his knees and bowed deeply before raising his face. “Father. I am most sorry to have worried you.”

“Indeed.” The Mikado paused for a second. “Did you not have something you wished to tell me?”

His Father’s face was utterly expressionless, but Chagum nonetheless detected a sliver of caution deep in his eyes as he looked into them. “Yes, of course. Father. Master Star Reader. I thought that I should tell you the reason behind why I couldn’t wake up, considering the possibility that this information may be of use in waking the First Queen from her sleep.”

You must not declare that we can definitely save her. Chagum remembered Shuga saying. *Our position would then be compromised, if she chose to stay in the dream.*

“Aha. If so, then this would be a most important conversation. Very well. Speak.”

“Yes. Father, I had a very strange dream that night. It may just be because I was thinking about the mountain villa as I was falling asleep, but…” Chagum feigned uncertainty. “In the dream, there was a woman standing in the pale blue light, beckoning me forth. As I approached her, she said:

> ‘We are Mikado Yamur’s Second Queen.’ ”

The Mikado furrowed his eyebrows at this, but Chagum continued, paying this no heed. “I knew at the time that this was a dream, but it nevertheless left a profound impression on me.”

Chagum continued quickly so as to not give anyone a chance to interrupt him. “The person claiming to be Mikado Yamur’s Queen recounted to me a most strange tale, all the while warning me not to dismiss this as a mere dream. She also instructed me very clearly to convey her words to the Mikado. I will now proceed to convey them.”

Chagum took a deep breath and straightened his back before speaking again. “She said:

> ‘We dreamed of a beautiful palace made of plain wood built by the bank of a blue lake. Unbeknownst to all, some nobles lived there. Their birthplace had prospered for more than a thousand years prior, but was now in its twilight and would soon perish. Nobles from across those thousand years sang for Us about the vicissitudes of their lives, and their last dreams. They told Us that they transform into the Flower and live their dreams, until a wind from your world blows and they scatter. They asked Us to build a palace on the bank of this lake and let their dreams bloom. Should We do so, they will welcome the soul of Our son into their ranks. It is after hearing this song, this wish, that We had the mountain villa constructed. And after death, Our soul, along with those nobles, became the Flower and dreamed.’ ”

Chagum continued.

> “ ‘However, listen well Our grandson, this Flower’s nature is to entice. It shows sweet and beautiful dreams, like no other, to lonely souls. Even now, the Queen who has lost her son is trapped in such a dream. Listen well, grandson. The time for this Flower’s petals to scatter has finally come. The coming night of the half moon will be the night of ruin. When a path opens between this world and yours, those residing within the villa risk being pulled into dreams of despair. Grandson, take care that none but the slumbering Queen remain within the mountain villa on that night. Furthermore, as the one who dreamed of those who became the Flower, those who will soon perish, please bid Us Our final farewell. Guide those sad souls who remain trapped in a dream so that they may be able to return.’ ”

Chagum took a break, having recounted the whole story at once. The Mikado had been looking at Chagum the entire time. “I see. Certainly, a very strange dream. Moreover, you remembered it in its entirety? Can one truly recall a dream with such clarity?”

Chagum hesitated for a second. “That very detail is precisely the reason I thought this to be more than a mere dream. It still echoes within me vividly, like a song that continues to play in one’s head.”

The Mikado stilled completely, thrown off his line of thought. “Hmm. Regardless, you wish to tell me that you believe this dream and wish to empty the mountain villa on the night of the next half moon.”

Chagum averted his eyes. “That is so. I am aware that I may be ridiculed for believing a dream and acting on it. However, as this concerns the First Queen I thought that, with the consent of yourself and the Master Star Reader, it could be done.”

Silence took over the room. The Mikado discreetly turned his gaze to the Star Reader behind Chagum.

“Should we proceed, there would be no need to tell those involved the whole truth.” Chagum stiffened upon hearing the Star Reader’s deep voice from behind. “If the Mikado orders it so, we could declare that perhaps the mountain villa needs to be purified. Then, an evacuation would certainly be possible. I could take responsibility for the protection of the First Queen.”

The Mikado stood up. “You give the impression that you believe Chagum’s dream.”

“A dream is always just a dream. Nevertheless, given the fact that the First Queen is still asleep, and that the Crown Prince himself was in a similar state until yesterday, it is not unthinkable that the strange dream he had as he slept would have some kind of meaning.”

Chagum masked his intense relief. The Star Reader continued speaking with a voice that suggested a slight smile. “What does appear to be a problem,

however, is the suggestion that His Highness the Crown Prince spends that night on the bank of the lake."

The Mikado nodded fervently. "Precisely. I will not let the Crown Prince take such a risk. Who knows what might happen there?"

Chagum started speaking, all the while internally chanting 'don't panic', over and over again. "But, Father, that dream… the sadness of those nobles… only I, having had that dream, can truly understand. Since I've been able to escape from the confines of that dream once already, surely I would be able to act as a guide. Please, please allow me this single whim, just this once."

The Mikado's eyes sharpened. "Had you any self awareness of your position as the Crown Prince, you would not ask such things."

Chagum's pulse heightened enough to make his chest hurt. He was desperate, now. He turned his face away and spoke again. "I only became the Crown Prince because of my brother's untimely passing; because the First Queen lost her son. I have not grown used to it yet. Father, it was me and only me who had this dream. I am sure that there must be some reason for this. Won't you let me do this, so that I can both apologise to and thank the First Queen from the bottom of my heart? I think only then will I be able to come to terms with the fact that I am now the Crown Prince. Since the Hunters are under your command, you could order Jin and the others to guard me. Then, there should be no chance of me coming to harm. I ask again, please, grant me this wish."

The Mikado frowned in the direction of the Star Reader. The Star Reader's face, as usual, appeared vaguely amused. "It would seem that His Highness the Crown Prince has changed somewhat, as a result of this dream." He continued in a serene voice. "Mikado, what are your thoughts on this? I, for one, think that this is a change in the right direction."

"Is that so?" The way the Mikado was looking at Chagum was not the way a Father might look at his son. Chagum had hated his father's gaze since so very long ago, to the point where it usually made him feel sick. This time,

though, he didn't feel such nausea. Such was the extent of the distance he had drifted from his Father.

A thought crossed Chagum's mind - in the future when he became the Mikado, in what way would he look at his own son?

"Very well then. It is not as if I don't understand your desire for some closure regarding your brother's death. It is also true that you have escaped that dream once already. I will give you the Hunters. Take this opportunity to try your hand at leading some men."

Chagum put both his hands atop his knees and bowed deeply.

Upon hearing of these proceedings, later on that day in the study room, Shuga stared at Chagum. "Your Highness! What did you… why did you add all of these details?"

Chagum smiled slightly. "Since it got us more than we wanted, it's fine isn't it? I wanted to meet everyone again, no matter what. That, and I want to see how this plays out with my own eyes."

Shuga cursed himself. He should have predicted that Chagum would be able to scheme at least to this extent. His ability to do so was clear to anyone who knew his personality and was aware of the strength he possessed.

His irritation would not diminish. "Your Highness! No one knows what will happen at the mountain villa on that night. Balsa's group, and even the Hunters, will be there of course, but what if even they cannot protect you?"

Chagum shrugged his shoulders. "If that happens…" He swallowed the remainder of the sentence when someone knocked at the door.

"What is it?" Both Chagum and Shuga froze upon hearing the voice that responded. "It is Hibi Tonan. Please excuse this sudden visit, but there is a matter I wanted to discuss with the Crown Prince."

Chagum answered, after remembering how to breathe. "You may enter."

The Master Star Reader came alone, without even an attendant. He opened the door himself and entered the room. He bowed slightly and sat down in the chair indicated by the Crown Prince. He did not seem surprised that Shuga was already in the room.

He faced Chagum and started without preamble. “Well then, Your Highness. I have come to inquire as to how much of the story you just told was true, and how much was made up.”

Chagum’s face stiffened, but he quickly regained himself and glared at the Master Star Reader. “What are you talking about? I said nothing but the truth.”

“Is that so? Unfortunately, that is not what it sounded like to me. In particular, regarding the order for Your Highness to act as a guide for the souls trapped in the dream.” Hibi Tonan smiled. “It sounded rather like a detail added solely for Your Highness’s benefit.”

Chagum’s heart was about to explode with how fast it was beating. The Master Star Reader, expressionless, nodded, compelling Chagum to speak. “You probably know this already, but I can’t help hating the fact that I have to live as the Crown Prince now. If I had any say in the matter, I would have chosen to live my life as just Chagum. A commoner.”

Chagum continued after a pause. “The part about the Flower trapping people in a dream is true; it captures people who want to escape from their current lives, like me. It gives you dreams of things you want from the bottom of your heart. It’s also true that the First Queen was captured by the Flower, but I have seen firsthand that she is but one of many.”

Chagum glared with eyes that screamed defiance at the Master Star Reader, who continued sitting there with a blank face. “That the Flower will scatter on the night of the half moon is also true. When it does, something strange will surely happen at the mountain villa, hence why I want to evacuate it.”

“However, I made up Mikado Yamur’s Queen. The one who truly saved me from the dream and told me what was going on was Tanda.”

The Master Star Reader's expression changed for the first time. "Tanda?'

"Yes. The pupil of the magic weaver Torogai. The one who helped save me a year ago."

So that Shuga's secret would not be revealed, Chagum told the Master Star Reader that he found out about everything from Tanda. With a bitter smile he explained himself. "You understand the reasons why I couldn't tell Father that."

The Master Star Reader straightened. "I see. What about you personally going to the lake that night, Your Highness?"

"That's a lie too. Tanda said that Master Torogai would be able to save the trapped souls with a technique called the Soul Call. However, a spirit called the Flower's Guardian won't let her; it will attack her on sight. That's why I wanted the Hunters - to protect Master Torogai. I made up the part about me needing to be a guide to that end."

Chagum discreetly peered at Shuga before facing the Master Star Reader. "I want to get over my feelings and settle this matter. I want to see with my own eyes what happens on that night. I want to know whether the souls trapped in their pleasant dreams will return or not, and whether they will have a chance to make their lives better."

The Master Star Reader didn't say anything for a while and just looked at Chagum. Eventually he spoke with a voice as cold as the steel of a sword. "There is not just one path open to you, Your Highness. You are aware of this, are you not? The Mikado is still young. It is possible that he will have another son with a Queen in the future. Even if another son was not born, one of the princesses from Sannomiya would suffice. In either case, the continuation of the bloodline would not be dependent on Your Highness."

His next words were spoken with a finality. "However, for someone who has fully accepted the role of Crown Prince, there would then be only one path remaining. The Crown Prince is he who *will* become the Mikado. Nothing short of death by illness or accident could come to prevent this. After all, it

is common sense that a Crown Prince who simply does not want to become the Mikado could not possibly exist." Shocked into silence by the Star Reader's words, Chagum and Shuga could only look at him. "Even so, do you still wish to go to the lake that night?"

Chagum responded quietly. "Yes. Because only such a death by illness or accident would await me otherwise."

Hibi Tonan smiled. "I understand. Then we will leave the Mikado with the story he has already heard. Preparations to deploy the Hunters for Your Highness should begin shortly."

Once he stood up, Shuga got his attention. "Could I also be permitted to accompany His Highness tomorrow night?"

The Master Star Reader looked down at Shuga. "That will be fine. Protect him well."

Once he had left and the sound of his footsteps died out into silence, Shuga whispered. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Your Highness. I will never forget how you protected me."

"With this I can send Jin over to Balsa, but…" Chagum smiled wryly despite his pallid face. "But now, if I try to run away with Balsa, the Hunters' blades will surely turn against me…"

For those interested:

1. Hibi Tonan is written □□□□□□. Easy romanisation this time.

Chapter 4 Part 1

The Hunter Jin's promise

It was a bit before noon.

Torogai, who had been lying motionlessly next to the sunken hearth, looked up at the door at the same time as Balsa, who had been performing maintenance on her spear. Torogai sat up and whispered. “Someone crossed the barrier…”

Balsa stood up, spear in hand, and pulled open the door.

A man was standing in the dew-drenched meadow, his pale brown hakama tucked into shin guards. A plain double-edged sword was hanging from his belt. He looked like a normal soldier, not standing out in the least, but there were no openings in his stance.

“Long time no see, Spear-wielder Balsa.” Balsa smiled. “I’m glad you made it, Mister Jin.”

“Drop the Mister. Just Jin is fine.” Jin retorted playfully, his eyebrows slightly raised. “If only I had known that this was your hideout back then… though to be fair it would have been of no use considering how badly you tore me up. I wouldn’t have been able to follow you here after you had just put me on death’s doorstep anyway.” Both of them laughed slightly.

As Jin scanned the surroundings, the northern grove caught his attention. His face suddenly grew stiff. “I see. Something strange is over there. Like a beast.”

Balsa nodded and led Jin inside the house. Torogai and Jin had met before but Yugno, to whom Jin was a stranger, greeted him with a perplexed expression. After hearing from Balsa that a martial arts master was coming, he may have been expecting a large man, like those ballads spoke of.

Balsa, feeling impatient, got straight to the point. “Entrusting someone else with this battle is not easy for me, but right now I have no choice but to rely on you.”

“Yeah. I heard roughly about what is going on from Shuga. It’s somewhat hard to believe that the calm and cheerful Tanda I knew turned into something like that. It’s definitely gonna be tough to hold him off for any amount of time without killing or hurting him too much.”

“That’s not all. It seems like he doesn’t feel any pain. I dislocated his right shoulder, but he just started hitting me in the face with his left arm instead.”

The corners of Jin’s lips quirked upwards slightly. “Tough was a bit of an understatement then. But, I owe him my life; I will see what I can do.”

Balsa bowed her head deeply. “Thank you.”

“No need. Anyway, I was thinking, if he has turned into a beast, how about we capture him like one? With a net or some rope.”

Balsa's face clouded over. "I thought of doing that at first too. The thing doesn't see Tanda's body as anything more than a tool, though. If we tied him up, he would rub his skin and flesh off to the bone to escape. How would we stop that? We can't talk to him, and he won't pass out. We can capture him with a net, but it won't stop struggling until Tanda's body is in pieces. By nightfall Tanda would be…"

Jin frowned. "I see."

Balsa shook her head slightly as if to dislodge an unpleasant image. "That's why we only want enough time to get to the lake before him, then you should let him chase us. Otherwise he might get hurt. That's what we wanted to ask of you."

"Got it." Jin nodded, then continued speaking, remembering something. "Oh yeah, I almost forgot. The Crown Prince is coming to that lakeside tonight."

"What?" Both Balsa and Torogai stared at Jin wide-eyed. Balsa clicked her tongue. "I know why he did it, but isn't this too dangerous? Why didn't you stop him?"

Jin responded soothingly. "I have the Hunters Zen and Yun protecting him, so nothing shall be able to physically harm him."
Torogai and Balsa exchanged looks. They were more worried about spiritual harm than physical, but they weren't about to tell Jin this. Feeling that her worries had doubled, Balsa sighed.

Jin spoke decidedly, trying to dispel the heavy atmosphere. "Either way, I'll delay the Flower's Guardian or whatever he's called for as long as I can. There's no use in worrying about anything else right now."

Once everything was ready, Balsa stopped and looked back at Jin, with one hand on the front door. She inhaled quietly, but no words came to her. Jin's chest was pierced by her expression. Balsa was clearly wishing she could be in two places at once. She feared that Jin would hurt Tanda but could not say that to him when he was about to risk his life in a desperate battle.

He grabbed Balsa's arm without thinking. "If I can't hold him back, I'll aim for his left leg. For the bone. You understand what I'm getting at, right?"

Jin took his sword belt off in front of Balsa and used it to tie the sheath and handle of his weapon together. He was signalling that his intention was to never draw his sword, no matter the circumstances.

Balsa looked at Jin with profound gratitude in her eyes and quietly said. "It seems this time, I owe you a life. I will definitely pay you back some day."

Jin snorted. "Don't make me laugh. I'm here to repay a favour in the first place, remember? If we include your debts and favours too it will just complicate matters. Anyway, now that you're ready, isn't it time to go?"

Jin left first, then Balsa, followed by Torogai. When Yugno finally stepped out into the meadow, everyone suddenly felt the thing in the northern grove.

"I'm dissolving the barrier." Torogai murmured. Balsa and Jin moved to stand on either side of Yugno, who was staring at the grove without blinking, his face drained of blood. Torogai closed her eyes and put her hands together in front of her chest. She then quickly and forcefully parted them.

The second she did that, a black shadow shot out of the branches like an arrow. Aiming straight for Yugno.

Jin swung his sheathed sword in a wide arc. It connected with the shadow's flank. The Flower's Guardian fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Yugno was still frozen, so Balsa grabbed his hand and started running just before Jin shouted "Go!". She didn't turn back.

Jin's attacks were such that any normal human would have been unable to move for a while for lack of breath.The Flower's Guardian though, regained his breath in seconds with no signs of feeling pain. It also looked like he had put the shoulder Balsa dislocated back into place.

I see. This thing isn't human.

When he looked into the eyes of the Flower's Guardian his chest felt cold. The face was definitely Tanda's, but his demeanour was nowhere to be seen.

How does a human face change this much with a single expression?

Jin noticed the Flower's Guardian bending his legs at the knees and figured that he would try to pursue Yugno by jumping over his opponent. A moment later, the Guardian was in the air above Jin, who just about managed to grab his left ankle. Jin's whole body was pulled by the momentum and he ended up falling to the ground.

He didn't let go of the ankle during the fall, but the Flower's Guardian tried kicking Jin's arm with his right leg, to dislodge it. Right before his leg could connect, Jin let go of the ankle, rolled and jumped back onto his feet. Nevertheless, the Guardian managed to get back up slightly faster. He shot past Jin, uncaring, in the direction Yugno had run off to.

Jin grabbed his still-sheathed sword and threw it. It got caught between the running legs of the Flower's Guardian and tripped him up. Jin threw himself onto the Guardian before he could get up. He quickly passed each of his arms under the armpits of the Guardian and laced his fingers on the back of his head. Like this, not only did Jin immobilise the joints in the shoulders and the neck, he could also with but a slight change in position even break the neck of his opponent.

Having shifted his weight backwards, Jin thought that he had captured the Flower's Guardian. He would simply need to maintain this lock for as long as he could and everything would be fine. If he managed to kick his opponent's legs out from under him, roll to the ground, and wrap both his legs and arms around his opponent's he would be able to hold him down until he ran out of strength.

Jin, similarly to Balsa, had experienced real combat since early childhood. When one becomes truly good at martial arts, one can manipulate their own weight to an extent. Jin was by no means a big man, but by cleverly

changing his center of gravity or using breathing techniques, he could make his body feel heavier than that of any bigger man. He had absolute confidence that once he held an opponent this tightly, there could be no escape.

That's why when he felt the Flower's Guardian moving under his arms, Jin felt a cold, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The Guardian started bending his arms towards his back. Hearing the creaking of his opponent's arm bones, Jin broke into a cold sweat.

This thing is trying to break both of his bones!

It was trying to escape Jin's tight hold by breaking Tanda's bones. Jin remembered Balsa's words:

"It doesn't see Tanda's body as anything more than a tool."

Whether he broke his own arms, or even if they were cut off, as long as he was still alive he would chase after Yugno. The terror of this creature finally sank into Jin's body.

He quickly loosened his arms and kicked his opponent in the back of the knees. They jerked and shook and the Guardian fell to the ground. Jin positioned himself with his legs spread on either side of the Guardian's knees. He then stuck his knees into the backs of the Guardian's knees and suppressed his legs with his own shins. He also held down the Guardian's neck with his right hand, making sure his head couldn't move. The Guardian swung both of his arms in an attempt to remove the hand holding his head down, but Jin swatted them away with palm strikes. However, the Guardian would not stop moving and continued trying to get Jin off of him without pause and with inhuman strength.

Jin's forehead was covered with sweat. He didn't even know how much time had passed since the beginning of their fight. He managed to swat the Guardian's arms while simply holding him down for quite a while, but eventually his concentration broke for a second.

In that second the nails of the Guardian's right hand cut Jin’s right arm. A hot pain pierced him and he covered the wound with his left hand by reflex. The Guardian used this lapse to heave his entire body, like a shrimp, sending Jin to the ground faster than he could formulate a coherent thought.

When the Guardian stood up he attacked Jin. It would seem he deemed this man to be an obstacle in his pursuit of Yugno.

It wasn’t the way a human fought. With nails and teeth, he tried to rip Jin apart. He started hitting Jin’s head with an incredible speed. Jin tried twisting it away slightly, but only ended up with a slash right next to his left eye, the blood filling it and making it hard to see. When Jin finally noticed that the Guardian was aiming for his throat, he realised that he couldn’t afford to hold back any longer.

As the Guardian tried to latch onto his throat with his teeth, Jin screamed and struck his opponent’s chin with his right fist as hard as he could. The Guardian’s head was flung backwards, allowing Jin to punch him in the throat.

After finally getting away from the Guardian’s barrage of attacks, Jin used the opening by barging into him with his shoulders, and striking slightly above his left ankle with a chop. He could feel the bone snap cleanly under his hand.

Just as he thought he had done it, the Guardian’s right hand hit him on the cheek. The impact was as intense as if he had been hit with a club. His vital points barely avoided, Jin was sent flying and lost consciousness before he even hit the ground.

The Flower’s Guardian tried standing up, and only then noticed that he couldn’t use his left leg much. He sat down for a while, touching it. Eventually he got up onto all fours and restarted his pursuit, running on two hands and one leg. Surprisingly, even in that state, he did not run much slower than a normal human.

The Flower’s Guardian, in Tanda’s body, was gone in the blink of an eye, resuming his pursuit of Yugno.

Chapter 4 Part 2

The lake in the mountains

When the afternoon sun started to lower, Balsa and the others stopped their horses. Balsa dismounted first and lifted Torogai, who had been sitting in front of her, down from the horse.

“That was awful, just awful.” Torogai stretched her aching back, muttering all the while.

Yugno smoothly slipped off his horse and crumpled onto the ground. He had ridden on horseback only twice or thrice before as a reward for singing for rich people, but such experiences could not have prepared him for riding alone at the speed necessary to keep up with Balsa’s horse in front. The skin on the backs of his knees had peeled away, and his thighs would not stop trembling. He would not be able to stand for a while.

“You okay over there?” Balsa leaned over to peer at Yugno’s pale face. He moaned as he rubbed his cramping legs. Balsa placed a hand on his shoulder. “Let’s rest for a bit. We had the horses go pretty fast. Human legs couldn’t possibly keep up.”

They had travelled for almost five *dan*[1] since leaving Tanda’s house and getting horses from the nearby village of Yashiro. Once mounted, they left the village and crossed the shallows of the Aoyumi River. From here, there were paths leading up into the mountains that had been made by the transportation of felled lumber down to the river. Balsa and the others continued their journey by following one such path in the direction of the mountain villa.

The place Balsa had now stopped them at was a watering hole for pack horses; a place the lumberjacks made to let their horses rest. Beyond this, though, the logging road veered off to the North and wouldn't lead them any closer to the mountain villa. To continue, they instead would be entering the realm of the royal family, where activities such as cutting trees and hunting were not permitted.

Balsa left Yugno and Torogai to rest, and untacked the horses. The watering hole consisted of a bamboo pipe which transported water from the lake to a box in a hole dug out at ground level. She collected the cold water dripping from the pipe and brought some to the resting pair. Then, she pulled the horses along and let them drink their fill. When she placed the feed bags around their necks, they happily and noisily started to devour the contents.

Watching them made Balsa suddenly feel rather hungry. So far they had been riding with such urgency that she didn't even begin to feel like eating in the few breaks they had.

Not much of a bodyguard, am I? Balsa thought as she took out a parcel wrapped in bamboo peel, opened it and started eating some *shuruji*, which are made of finely-diced dried meat, first stewed in salt and sugar, then mixed with freshly cooked rice and formed into shapes easy to hold and eat while on journeys. Seeing Balsa stuff her cheeks with *shuruji*, Torogai extended her hand in the universal gesture of 'give me some too'.

"You guys are amazing." Yugno murmured, his breath feeble and intermittent. "I couldn't possibly eat anything."

Balsa sat down next to him, took out a small wooden container from her bag, opened its lid, and took out a fragrant, red *maika* fruit stewed in honey. "Get this in your mouth. Bite it slowly then swallow, bit by bit."

Yugno scrunched his face in distaste, but still put the honeyed fruit in his mouth. Soon after, his eyes flew open in surprise. A surprisingly refreshing sweetness accompanied by a pleasant aroma spread through him. His mumbling of "I didn't think *maika* were this good…" made Balsa smile.

“I brought a bit of Tanda’s prized honeyed maika along. I think he slowly boils it in honey with a herb called *roga*.” She replied.

“Interesting. My head feels so much better. I feel like all that tiredness was just taken away.”

“I know right? It’s the best medicine for tiredness.” Suddenly a memory flashed before Balsa’s eyes, surprising in its clarity. It was from when she was about eighteen. She was returning home just as the bone-deep tiredness from Jiguro pushing her to her limits was starting to set in. Tanda brought her some *maika* on a plate. She wouldn’t ever forget that taste. She felt like the pain in her flushed body just disappeared…

Torogai reached out and took a *maika* for herself. “They say that healing is a woman’s job, but that’s a load of crap. Tanda is a born healer. Making this kind of stuff is what he’s best at.”

Yugno glanced at Balsa. She was looking at the fruit in her hand with a severe expression.

When everyone finished their honeyed *maika*, Balsa wiped her hands on some grass and stood up. “Let’s get going. We have to get to the lake before the moon rises.”

Balsa tied the horses to a tree next to the watering hole and hefted the now-slightly-lighter luggage over her shoulder on the end of her spear. They would have to traverse the pathless slope on foot from here on.

Balsa took the front and made a path, sometimes cutting through bushes with her hatchet. Yugno followed behind her with Torogai bringing up the rear. Balsa steadily made progress, but the others could only follow at a much slower pace, after having tired themselves out with the unfamiliar strain of horse riding. Nevertheless, they simply continued to push on, no matter how many breaks were necessary.

As the sun continued its descent, less and less light could reach them through the foliage. The three walked in silence, between trees that were now only bathed in twilight on their northern sides.

Eventually, the sun set and Balsa stopped for a while to use some flint and tinder and skillfully lit a torch which consisted of a candle in a basket woven with thin bamboo, held away from oneself by its short handle.

“Can you hold this?” Balsa passed the torch to Yugno then went back to cutting a path through the undergrowth. The light hardly reached Balsa’s feet, but her gait never wavered. Other than the cries of birds flying out of the trees startled by the noise, Balsa’s hatchet-cutting, and three pairs of footsteps, the forest was silent.

As Torogai walked, she began to feel as if she were in a dream. Like when she was young and she was called by the mountains, and she just kept walking until she reached the lake. She was in a dream back then after all...

In the middle of pitch black mountains. Walking and walking and walking…

Suddenly, just like that time, it stretched out before them. Surrounded by tall peaks, the black, enormous lake spread out from mountain to mountain. Torogai felt a numbing shock go through her head and she was frozen in place. “It’s this lake…”

Balsa and Yugno turned around upon hearing how hoarse Torogai’s voice was. She stood, dazedly looking at the lake, then pointed at the northern mountains. “That other time, I crossed the mountains from that side. My birth village lies beyond those mountains. The graves of my children…”

Torogai felt as if her face was stroked by a pair of cold hands. Memories of her husband and the deaths of her children flowed before her eyes like some unstoppable current. She bitterly thought that for all this time she had managed to subconsciously look away from her past, keeping a lid on these memories. The past she had so long ago thrown away, turned her back on, walked away from, and endeavoured to forget, was now reaching out to her with those cold hands.

In addition to that, there was the effect of seeing the imposing mountain villa, towering over the lake’s banks. Torogai shivered as a chill ran down her

spine. That huge gate and the complicated roof made of white wood; it was without a doubt the palace from that dream.

Was the upside-down palace floating in the lake that I dreamt of fifty-two years ago a reflection of this palace through time?

Torogai took in a deep breath and scolded herself.

Impossible. The mountain villa is simply an imitation of that dream. Built by one who had the same dream as me. I heard that it was exactly the same in Chagum's message, didn't I?

Torogai knew exactly why she was this shaken. She closed her eyes and told herself:

I'm not the miserable, weak little Tomca from fifty-two years ago anymore. I am the magic weaver, Torogai. One who walks upon this earth.

Torogai spoke to Balsa and Yugno with strength in her voice. "Anyway, let's put up a barrier. Make the preparations as I showed you."

The three of them walked past the clumps of reeds that grew on the banks of the lake, and came out onto the edge of the lapping water. Torogai stabbed four thick and long reeds, which she had pulled out from the reed bed, into the bank. She connected the reeds with a rope woven from thin grass. Meanwhile, Balsa and Yugno took the four unglazed fire grates that they had brought with them, placed some charcoal on each, then lit them using the torch. To get them properly burning, they put some peculiar-smelling dry grass on top.

The white smoke that emanated from the dry grass, rose into the air like a smoke signal and slowly drifted towards the lake.

For those interested:

1. Shuruji is written □□□□ in katakana.

2. Maika is written □□□ in katakana. This was a weird fruit name to me, because that's how you katakana the English word mica, which is a silicate mineral. You wouldn't wanna eat that. Interestingly, it's also a type of squid… What are you doing Nahoko?
3. Roga is written □□ in katakana.

Chapter 4 Part 3

The gate of the moon

Balsa thought she heard someone calling her name and raised her head.

When she saw four person-shaped shadows approach from around the lake, her chest swelled with joy.

“Balsa!” Chagum ran, tripping over himself. He had grown taller since the last time they had met. His voice was also no longer the high pitched trill of a child, but had dropped and become that of a young man.

“Hey! Watch out! Don’t you damage the barrier! Step over it carefully as you come in.” Chagum slowed down after hearing Torogai’s worried shout. He gently stepped over the rope as he was told, his face screwing up at the sight of Balsa. Memories of the time they spent together flashed before his eyes.

“You’ve grown so much, haven’t you Chagum?” Balsa’s voice was hoarse as she took hold of his face. The top of Chagum’s head used to just about come up to her chest, but now it reached all the way up to her shoulder level. He embraced her tightly and started to sob.

Neither had thought that they would get to meet again, and once this night was over they would have to part once more.

Shuga and the Hunters Zen and Yun had entered the barrier soon after Chagum, and now stood still, just watching the two of them silently.

“The moon is rising…” At Torogai’s warning, everyone looked up into the sky. The dull-red face of the large half-moon was peeking over the ridges of

the mountains.

“So, I need to make preparations for the Soul Call before the moon is reflected in that lake. Can you all sit quietly while I do that?” Balsa returned to her senses upon hearing Torogai’s voice. Chagum let go of Balsa and, with a chastised expression, started to sit on the ground, only to be stopped by a panicking Yun. “Please wait a second, Your Highness.”

He removed a cloth from his back and laid it down on the ground. Chagum looked at the cloth with a displeased expression, and only when Balsa nodded did he obediently sit down on it.

Balsa looked over at Shuga who was standing nearby and bowed her head deeply. She made it look like an innocuous greeting of a stranger, but it seemed like Shuga understood her true intention. He smiled slightly before returning to a serious expression, and reciprocating her bow.

Balsa also nodded in greeting to the two Hunters, who did not look at all similar to one another. The short and stout Hunter with a thick neck, Zen, expressionlessly returned her nod. However, the one whose face bore a scar that she had once caused, the thin and tall Yun, hesitated for a moment before sullenly reciprocating.

Balsa tried feeling out for anyone else who may have been hiding in the surroundings, which were dark and deeply silent except for the occasional whistling of birds. She couldn’t sense the Guardian of the Flower. It looked like they had managed to safely get here without being followed.

She couldn’t bring herself to be glad for this though, as she imagined Tanda, running in the darkness and becoming increasingly worn down.

Don’t come here, Tanda! Despite thinking this, she nevertheless couldn’t stop another thought from popping into her head. *Please show me that you’re still alive Tanda.*

Before she knew it, the moon had become a small, bright and white semicircle that hung high in the night sky. The outlines of the surrounding mountains were made apparent by its light. The white, wooden roof of the

lifeless mountain villa, towering over the opposite shore, was glimmering in the light as if covered in frost.

Suddenly, Yugno stirred. “What’s wrong with the palace?”

Everyone looked at the lake’s surface where Yugno was pointing. The mountain villa was reflected in the dark surface of the lake, as clearly as if in a mirror. The reflection was far too clear to be caused by the moonlight. Yet more unsettling, however, was the stillness of the image, undisturbed even as the wind created ripples on the surface of the lake.

Chagum whispered, trembling, “The moon is weird too…” The object visible in the sky was a perfect half moon, but the reflection in the lake below instead depicted a swollen, almost full, moon. As they watched, it seemed to grow ever fuller, as if a circular window were opening up in the sky, gradually letting more and more light through.

The moment the moon became completely full, a high pitched noise rang out and broke through the silence. It crept over Balsa’s skin as its pitch became higher and higher.

“Wind?” Shuga shook his head at Balsa’s murmured question. “The surface of the lake is undisturbed. As are these flames and the nearby reeds.”

Nonetheless, those sitting there by the lake certainly felt something like wind.

“Ah.” Everyone saw it at the same time and sucked in a sharp breath. The mountain villa was in total darkness, with not a single light visible, but the upside-down palace reflected on the surface of the water was illuminated from within by a warm, dim, flickering brightness, like that of a torch.

“It’s the Flower” Chagum whispered. “That’s the light of the Flower, coming from the inner-garden.” Balsa grabbed Chagum’s arm suddenly upon hearing his sleepy and spaced out answer. “Don’t get pulled in Chagum! You’ve gotta keep it together!”

Chagum started trembling. Some of the others, who were also starting to drift off, looked at Balsa with expressions as if she had just kicked them awake. “Be careful! That Flower attracts dreams. Right now, *here* and *there* are close together. Connected! If you relax, you’re gonna get dragged in!” Balsa felt that her desperate words were ineffective like a muffled, distant shout within a dream. The air felt like liquid.

It was then that light started to bleed forth from Torogai’s slowly swaying body. It was a pale yellow glow, resembling the light of fireflies. With time, that light gathered at her forehead.

Balsa then saw a soul for the first time. It took on the shape of a beautiful bird and rose up, still shining like a firefly, only to be sucked straight into the moon on the lake’s surface, dragging a white thread behind it.

Torogai was sucked into the reflected moon at great speed, reminiscent of a bird trapped in an air current. The aimlessly lingering, bluish mist in the area made her think of the blue tint of the fading darkness just before dawn.

Alarm bells deep within her were ringing.

There is a strong magic hidden among this mist. I can’t let myself get caught up in it…

However, those feelings unravelled into nothing as she descended deeper into the blue mist, and her time began to flow backwards.

By the time she navigated the interconnected corridors and arrived at the garden crowded with trees, she had forgotten fifty-two years of her lifetime and was once more the twenty year old Tomca.

When she saw a tall man dressed in grey robes tied with a brilliant green sash, Tomca felt a sharp joy. Before long, this turned into a warm euphoria that enveloped her.

“Tomca, where is the child?” Tomca, shocked at his words, looked down at her hands.

Gone! Even though I’ve been holding him this whole time…

Only a faint coldness in her arms remained, the baby’s warmth having disappeared. “It’s okay, Tomca. Why don’t you try calling for him? I’m sure he’ll come back.”

Tomca became relieved. “You’re right. I know where he is. I know how to return him to these arms too.”

Tomca spread her arms and called for her son.

A few things happened at once. The magic weaving tool made of a spike of zebra grass that Torogai was holding suddenly went up in flames. The rope of the barrier ripped and was flung outwards. A shadow reminiscent of a three-legged beast jumped out from the reed bed and attacked Yugno. Balsa just about managed to slide between the shadow and Yugno, but was beaten into the ground with tremendous force.

She saw Yun the Hunter, out of the corner of her eye, draw his sword, shouting “Monster!”

Balsa put her arm into the armpit of the Flower’s Guardian, wrapped her leg around his right ankle and turned him over with all of her strength, pinning him down.

Yun’s sword, which was meant for the Guardian’s back, instead pierced Balsa’s left shoulder.

As he pulled it out in surprise, Chagum came flying at Balsa, shouting the entire time, and pressed down on that shoulder, trying to stop the bleeding.

The Guardian began to writhe below Balsa in an attempt to get free. She suddenly got up and picked him up by the shoulder using only her right arm.

Balsa tried carrying him away like that, but he rolled both of his hands into fists and struck her back with immense force.

Balsa groaned, dropped the Guardian, and collapsed on top of him.

Yun was stopped by Zen from attempting to stab the Guardian again. “You protect His Highness!” He shouted his order at Yun as he himself restrained the Guardian’s hands from grabbing Balsa’s neck. She managed to raise her head while coughing. “Don’t kill him, it’s Tanda.”

“I know.” Zen pulled the Guardian from underneath Balsa, but when he noticed that the Guardian was trying to break his own arm to get free, he understandably paled.

Yugno was scared out of his mind. The monstrous Guardian kept lunging at him and when he stretched his fingers, crooked like an eagle’s talons, towards Yugno’s throat, he lost his senses completely.

Running on shaking legs, he desperately retreated away from the grappling fighters and towards the lake.

That’s when a pleasant smell wafted towards him. It reminded him of his hometown’s stew made over a sunken hearth and he became enveloped in its warmth.

He heard a nostalgic voice from deep within. “Yugno…”

Mom’s voice. Yugno thought with a clouded head. *The voice that always comforted me after a nightmare.*

The second he heard it, the stiffness brought on by extreme fright left his body and his awareness and memories of the current nightmare were pushed back into a far corner of his mind, as his desire to see his mother eclipsed everything.

“Come quickly…”

In that garden in which his soul was born, the light of the Flower flickered invitingly.

Yugno fell to his knees upon the grass…

The end of the Flower's world finally began. A gust of wind blew in like an omen and increased in intensity, its howl louder and louder.

As the wind started to get stronger, Tanda decided that he no longer had time to hesitate. He transformed into a bird and flew up, looking for Kaya.

The Flower's light swayed in time with the intense gusts, casting dancing shadows everywhere. Petals rained down from scattering flowers. The overpowering smell of the Flower began to transform into the sickly sweet scent of death.

Tanda panicked as he noticed that he couldn't control his flight as he wished.

Is it because of the wind? Or is my possessed body in the other world dying?

Whichever it was, an unbearable tiredness came over him.

At the very least, I want to save Kaya.

Tanda flapped his wings desperately and approached a flower head. It also appeared to be sharply swaying. His suspicions were confirmed when the petals scattered. He only barely dodged them.

Amongst the petals carried away by the wind he saw vague human shapes drift downwards.

As soon as he processed what he was seeing, he abruptly changed back into his human form.

"Kaya!" As he screamed her name, Tanda caught the falling shape of a girl and positioned himself below her, as they fell with their backs to the

ground, into the inner garden.

The impact of the fall was far smaller than Tanda expected. The water in the inner garden was somehow similar to sand. The girl in his arms began to move.

“Kaya, are you conscious?” At Tanda’s voice, Kaya looked up with confusion on her face.

“Uncle Tanda? Where are we? Why am I here?”

The flower heads were scattering one after another, and many human figures began falling into the inner garden like ripe fruit. Once on the ground, they curled up like babies and stopped moving.

Tanda thought to wake them, but he could not move as he wished to. A terrible tiredness overtook him.

I have to turn Kaya into a bird… With that thought, Tanda stopped moving. A paralysing fear entered the depths of his chest and he gradually picked himself up. *Am I gonna die in a place like this?*

The things he wanted to do, the future he should have lived, began to fade away like the light at dusk.

“Uncle Tanda? What’s wrong? What is going on?” Kaya shouted in fear as she shook Tanda.

He finally managed to find his voice again. “Kaya… You have to get away from here. Can you see the threads?”

“Threads?” Kaya squinted. As she noticed the thread of light coming out of her forehead, she raised her voice in surprise. “I see it! Uncle Tanda, I see the thread!”

Tanda grabbed Kaya’s hand. “I’ll turn you into a bird now, so promise me that you’ll follow that thread wherever it goes. You can fly home like that.”

“Into a bird? You can do that?”

Tanda lifted the corners of his mouth into a slight smile. “Yes, I can. I’m still a magic weaver, even if not a very good one.”

He closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them, he got started on his final job. He would turn Kaya into a bird by using subconscious suggestion. However, he still couldn’t move the way he wanted to. He felt himself become incredibly heavy, and his vision went dark…

Zen slowly let go of the Flower’s Guardian, who he had been holding down, and looked up at Balsa. She was pressing down on her injured shoulder and staring at Tanda’s unrecognisable form in a daze. She looked at his face, illuminated by the incandescent fire grates, and she got the feeling that he was at his limit.

Balsa felt pain in her chest as if she had been stabbed with a blade. Things hidden deep in her heart came forth unbidden in that moment, and her sadness spread like a numbing chill through her entire body.

Balsa kneeled next to the unmoving Tanda, cradled his head and pressed her forehead against his. She couldn’t stop her teeth from chattering. Her throat constricted and she couldn’t breathe. “Tanda…” Tears fell from her eyes. “Don’t you dare die. Tanda!”

Tanda thought he heard Balsa’s voice. He looked up. His body still felt heavy, but for some reason a desire to continue living began to insistently pulse inside him, giving him the strength necessary to move his body. He propped himself up on an elbow and noticed that Kaya was looking at him with worried eyes.

That’s right. For Kaya’s sake, he couldn’t let himself die now. Having thought that, he suddenly noticed that a young girl was standing next to the Flower’s Keeper by the roots of the scattering Flower. The girl seemed to not even notice the raging wind and had her arms out as if she were hugging someone.

She was nothing more than a young Yakoo girl, but her face held faint traces of familiarity.

Impossible… Tanda gasped before mustering his strength for a shout. “Ma...master! Master Torogai!!!”

The girl turned to look at Tanda with confusion, but a light returned to her eyes as they met his. “Tanda?”

When Tomca saw Tanda, a deep shiver went through her entire body. Something that had been put to sleep started to slowly but firmly awaken, and her plump face with a vague expression returned to its usual wrinkly and stubborn-looking gaze.

“Tomca, be careful, you’re starting to age unattractively.” The Flower’s Keeper warned harshly.

By the time she shook her head and laughed, her face had fully returned to that of Torogai. “Is that so? Is it really that bad? But you know what? This is just how I am; it took me fifty-two years to grow this face.” She glared at the Flower’s Keeper. “You aren’t the Flower’s Keeper, are you? You little shit, that was a dirty trick. I can’t believe I fell for it!”

Torogai turned herself into flames and jumped onto the man, but he swayed abruptly and disappeared. His illusions vanished with him, and Torogai was no longer shielded from the wind storm surrounding her. The petals continued to fall with the wind. The palace crumbled like sand and disappeared.

“This isn’t good!” Torogai grumbled as she tried to rush through the gale towards the crouching Tanda. As she proceeded, though, his form was obscured by the growing sandstorm.

“I won’t let you go.” A thin, high pitched, woman’s voice resounded. “We are all staying here forever. Return to me, sons who have escaped my grasp!”

Chapter 4 Part 4

With the wind of destruction, with the song

Shuga was looking down at Balsa as she pinned Tanda's unmoving body, when he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face it.

He opened his eyes wide. Yugno, who had previously dropped to his knees on the bank of the lake, was now falling forwards.

"Mr Yugno!" Shuga's voice overlapped with Yun's shout. "Your Highness? Your Highness! Is everything alright?"

Shuga turned around in a panic. Chagum, leaning on Yun, was desperately trying to wake his body up. Eventually he could support himself no longer and fell into Yun's arms as if he were severely inebriated.

Shuga realised that he could hear someone's voice, but it sounded strangely far away. When he tried running to Chagum's side he moved as if in a dream, never truly advancing.

Balsa raised her head upon hearing the shouts. She noticed that her surroundings were bizarrely distorted.

The wind, flowing and swirling towards the moon reflected in the lake, swallowing them all up.

Strangely, this wind was visible to the naked eye. And that wasn't all. Balsa could clearly see light swelling out from Yugno's and Chagum's foreheads, as if their souls were trying to escape. Also, a number of threads, similar to the one emanating from Torogai's forehead, were stretched out across the sky

towards the palace in the lake. These were the threads that connected the souls of the people trapped by the Flower to the lives that still remained in their bodies.

Balsa placed both of her hands on her knees and mustered all her strength to stand up.

Perhaps it was because of the countless times she had faced such knife-edge danger that, at times like these, Balsa's heart remained calm and collected. "Shuga! Yun! Shake Chagum! Don't let him fall asleep no matter what!"

Having shouted her orders she headed for Yugno, defying the swirling wind to help him when no one else would. She had to put all her strength into her legs with each step to reach his prone form. He was lying face down in the grass. Once there, she propped up his body with one arm.

Yugno's head lolled from side to side like that of a corpse. The thread extending from his forehead was rapidly becoming brighter, as if struggling to escape to the outside.

For the first time, Balsa regretted having no knowledge of magic weaving. All she could do was ask the people in her heart what to do. *Tanda, how can I get him to wake up?*

She suddenly raised her head. A thought had flashed through her brain. She looked around and shouted loudly. "Li! Echoes! Your loved one is about to be taken away!"

This place, beside the water in the middle of the mountains, was exactly the kind of place the echoes lived in. Even if they were invisible, they were surely here…

"Don't let him be taken, please! Li!"

Yugno was drawn to the nostalgic voice of his mother and tried to go to its source. The rich green garden his soul was born in, his tall father… The scenery he could see deep in the lake was unbearably nostalgic.

“Come quickly.” A pleasant voice was calling. Yugno started struggling to float upwards.

Suddenly, something grabbed him tightly. Countless small hands were clinging onto him and holding him in place. As soon as those hands were on him, he remembered the song of the Li, the one that he had first heard as a child, with unbelievable clarity.

He didn’t need anything else, as long as his songs could move people’s souls… He sang a song for the Li on that lake’s bank fully aware of their curse. The feverish feelings he felt back then welled up in his heart and revived that song. His skin broke out into goosebumps, and he remembered the heat he once felt.

At that moment, the power of the voice urging him to his death, which had been disguising itself as his mother’s voice, was suddenly interrupted. Yugno smiled at the Li, which were still clinging to him.

It’s ok. I’m not going anywhere. Yugno felt his soul return to his body with a whoosh.

“Yugno.” He heard Balsa speak. Just like the Li, she was holding onto his arm tightly. “Wake up, Yugno.” He could feel the warmth of her hand with his eyes still closed. He could feel a prayer in the tremble of that gripping hand. Yugno felt something stir deep in his heart.

He started hearing the muffled voices of men calling Chagum’s name from afar. The repeated calls and Balsa’s trembling hand gradually overlapped inside Yugno and resonated until they became a strong pulse that swayed him. A call to life, made of all the sensations in his body, started in the pit of his stomach.

The Li, who were still holding onto Yugno, began to murmur in resonance with the men’s voices; the reverberations shaking him. As they grew in

strength, they pleasantly jolted his heart. Grass, trees, bugs, birds, beasts, fish, stones, water. He could feel a quiet and bubbly shivering, released by all that existed by the bank of the mountain lake. Yugno opened his eyes and slowly stood up, smiling. *Keep trembling.* Yugno giggled. A ticklish joy bubbled within him. *Well then, let's shake, let's tickle, tremble and burst.*

Suddenly, a sound started spilling out of Yugno's throat. A high pitched singing, that harmonised with one's body, lifting it up. The Li happily joined into the harmonies, making the reeds tremble, until the whole earth and heaven trembled too. The singing became an unbearable joy and crossed the lake, rocking it.

The threads connecting the many lives and souls were rocked by the song as they disappeared into the lake. They started to pulsate and shimmer. The song became the wind, and the voice of heaven and earth.

The world of the Flower was fading quickly. The palace made of white wood was also disappearing like sand blown by the wind.

A strange wind, different to any so far, started blowing within that world. Tanda, who had been trapped in a sandstorm permeated with heavy malice, felt a strong and peaceful joy, akin to the rays of the morning sun caressing his face, as the refreshing wind blew the storm away. He felt like Balsa was telling him to not give up.

"Yeah." He murmured. "I won't."

Strength returned to his body, filling it like water. Light also appeared in Kaya's eyes. "This wind smells nice. It reminds me of rice fields. Actually, maybe a stronger smell. Like grass in the summer."

Two winds swayed the world. One smelled like death, the other like a field of grass in high summer; a mysterious smell of life. The two winds interweaved like twisted threads and whirled around each other while groaning. The surroundings changed appearance to that of a grassland swaying in a strong wind.

Tanda stood up slowly. The people who fell into the inner garden shivered slightly in the blowing wind as they got up. They started walking with uncertainty. Their legs felt unreliable at first, but one by one they began to skip, while indescribable smiles brightened their faces.

Kaya and Tanda were standing in an endless grassland at the height of summer. As they watched the windswept grass, excitement bubbled up from deep inside them and they suddenly wanted to run. They looked up at each other and when their eyes met they both burst into a sprint. The longer they ran for, the farther they wanted to go.

Kaya noticed that the thread extending from her forehead was glowing. From it, warmth pulsed down into her entire body. *I want to go back.* She felt a cold, numbing pain in the back of her nose. The smell of dew that accompanied every morning's trip to get water from the lake. The cold grass pressing against the sole of her bare foot. The chirping of birds. The faces of her family members. The faces of her friends. Those were all of the things that appeared in her mind's eye, one after another. Eventually, she could make out the full moon in the depths of the blue darkness far above her. Many threads were stretching towards it.

"Fly!" When Kaya heard Tanda's voice she started floating, as if she were being pulled in by her thread. The whirling wind tossed her this way and that as she ascended towards the full moon. Eventually, her whole body was completely covered in shining threads.

Tanda patiently watched over the dreaming souls as one by one they became jewels, shining with the faint light of fireflies, and were pulled up by their life threads.

There was no thread to pull him up. *That's it for me then.* As soon as he thought that, he remembered Master Torogai. He definitely saw her before this wind started blowing. Before everything was swallowed by the sand storm. Was that an illusion shown to him by the Flower?

With the first step he took to look for Master Torogai, he felt something tightly wrap around his legs. A blackened root. "I won't let *you* go. You will

dream with me for all eternity." The root quickly wrapped itself around Tanda like a snake and started squeezing him with tremendous power. From it a loneliness and sadness akin to falling into an endless black hole seeped into him. "Don't go…"

Tanda felt desperate arms clinging onto him. The sadness in that grasp deeply shook his heart. *You were this lonely…* As his mental strength and ability to resist waned, Tanda briefly relaxed; only for an intense yell to shock him into alertness.

"What are you doing, you shitty student!" Torogai briskly walked up to the entangled Tanda and stood in front of him. "You idiot! Why are you getting attached to your enemy? You're a magic weaver aren't you? Why are you letting yourself resonate with a soul in despair? If you think your enemy is pitiful, then how about you do everything you can to save them instead, hmm? You can start by shredding those flimsy roots to pieces."

Tanda smiled wryly as feelings of embarrassment and relief hit him at once. He closed his eyes and ignored his bindings. He let his whole body transform into water and easily slipped through the embrace of the roots. A sad scream rose up with the remaining roots, before they changed shape to that of the Flower's Keeper.

Torogai approached the Flower's Keeper and stretched out her arm to grasp his shoulder. "Stop hiding in the shadows of other people and show yourself, First Queen."

The face of the Flower's Keeper distorted and flickered between shapes before the bitter visage of a woman emerged from the distortion. The First Queen shrieked. "Get your filthy hands off me, you vulgar commoner!"

Torogai did not let go. "If I were still Tomca, I would have surely let go and covered my eyes by now. But you know what, Your Highness? I'm the magic weaver Torogai. I am one who exists between this world and the other, transcending your definition of status." She continued in a quieter tone of voice. "Your Highness, what is your name?"

The First Queen's white face trembled. "Riano."

“Well then, Riano. I came here to call back your soul.”

The haughtiness and pride of the First Queen faded from the woman’s face when she was called by her name. What surfaced in its place was an expression so pale and fragile, it looked as if it would break with a touch.

“I do not intend to go back.” Riano whispered. The vague shape of her son, Sagum, was visible in her arms. “I do not intend to return to a world where Crown Prince Sagum no longer exists.”

Torogai strongly gripped Riano's shoulder. "You know that he is not here either, don't you? Why else would you still look so unhappy? Why else would you have surrounded the Flower with this curse? The sadness of losing a child isn't gonna go away whatever you do. It's been fifty years since I lost mine, but there is still a sadness in my heart that hurts every time it's touched. But why do you think we still keep on living even when it hurts so much?"

"People are far tougher creatures than they themselves think." Torogai answered her own question with an expression that spoke of both sadness and joy. "Now, stop crying for the sake of crying like a spoiled brat and let go of your hatred. I know what you're going through. Your hatred is slowly being exposed for the flimsy, pale thing that it is. There is no shame in that."

Riano lifted her face and looked at Torogai for the first time. "I feel like I'm many other people all at once. When I invited Chagum over here and trapped him, it was out of a burning desire to make the Second Queen go through the same pain I did. However, when I became one with the Flower and cultivated his dreams, those feelings faded. Then, when he was leaving this place, I was distracted by the sound of strong wing beats and didn't manage to stop him."

She continued. "When embracing Yugno to stop him from becoming the wind that would awaken the Dreams, I wished that we would all become tiny and even disappear, but amidst that wind, I felt that going back to the normal world would not be so bad... It's my own soul, but it strangely won't do quite what I ask of it." Riano let a sad smile grace her lips. "I've dreamed many of these dreams. Those of men, women, girls and boys…"

Torogai smiled wryly. "That's tough. Dreaming is tiring, isn't it?"

Riano's smile widened. She nodded in agreement. "I feel like I've been dreaming for ten, maybe twenty years."

"Doesn't the smell of this wind remind you of the morning light?"

Riano's eyelids peacefully fluttered shut and she inhaled the smell of life that the wind carried. Torogai whispered, as she watched the mask of the Flower's Guardian, which was trapped within the Flower's stalk, blacken and wilt. "Look over there. This wind can't wake all the souls by itself."

Amongst those who fell from the petals and crumpled, some had severed life threads uselessly extending into nothingness from their sleeping faces, and they were slowly fading into the stem of the Flower.

"Sleep is so close to death, you see. The souls of those who are truly close to their limits can easily slide from sleep into the darkness of the other world." Torogai grabbed Riano's arm and said in a commanding voice. "It's time to wake up now! One day you won't be able to, no matter how much you might wish to. I'll give you the best send-off this magic weaver can, Riano. I'll turn you into a white bird and let you taste the joy of flying amidst the blue sky."

"Become a bird Riano! Imagine cutting the wind with your beautiful wings, a white flash dancing in the sky. In the world of dreams, your imagination is what's really powerful!"

Riano stilled for a while, as if uncertain, but eventually with a single intake of breath, she started glowing with the light of a firefly, and transformed into a beautiful white bird.

"Fly, Riano!" Pushed by Torogai's voice, Riano rose, and with a beat of her wings, she flew straight for the moon.

Torogai watched her disappear completely into the white light. Then she kicked Tanda, who was spacing out and staring into the moon, in the shin as hard as she could.

"Ouch!" Tanda groaned, holding onto his leg.

"You huge idiot! Making me work overtime like this!"

Tanda smiled while crying and looked up at Torogai. Her face suddenly stiffened. Tanda noticed that she was looking at something behind him and

turned around. A lone, tall man stood there, gazing at Torogai. She lost her voice. The face of the Flower's Keeper was far older than she remembered.

He smiled slowly. "Our son let the wind in, didn't he?" His voice had grown hoarse and hard to hear. His whole body was also gradually fading. He spoke again while looking at Torogai and Tanda. "The seeds were safely produced and most of the dreams returned. Your other son helped me out so much. I didn't intend to make a resentful Flower's Guardian, but the power of the pollinator Dream was so strong that I could never get anything to go quite the way I wanted."

"But you helped in the end, didn't you?" The Flower's Keeper nodded in answer to Tanda's question. "Yes. I did what I could, so that the Flower's Guardian wouldn't crush Yugno's throat."

He looked up at the moon. "The moon has begun to fade. This Flower's time is almost over." His body had become as transparent as the wings of a mayfly. He took Torogai's hands into his. "Farewell, my beloved Tomca. The Flower's life is an eternal cycle, but the me who treasures his memories of loving you is coming to an end. My world is about to disappear. This is goodbye for good."

"Farewell, my most beloved Tomca…"

Torogai grit her teeth. "Farewell."

He faded as if dissolving into Torogai's hands. She gasped. Along with the Flower's Keeper, she felt his last wish flow like a torrent and also melt into her hands. She held onto it. She took a deep breath and looked up. She quickly glanced Tanda's way then turned into a bird and rose into the sky, beating her wings strongly. Tanda quickly followed and flew after her. The two birds put all their strength into flying towards the disappearing moon. It was almost a half moon by now.

"We're gonna slip through! Make your body thin!" They twisted their bodies and slipped through into the bright light, as a gentle wind pushed them.

Yugno watched as a number of lights rose up from the moon reflected in the lake and scattered. Every time the threads coming out of the lights pulsed, a beautiful and clear sound resounded in the empty sky. As he watched, the moon waned and the upside-down palace vanished. Just as the light of the palace had vanished completely, two shining birds appeared on the surface of the lake, as if they had sucked up all of that remaining light.

Suddenly, he was filled with feelings of loneliness. The Flower he had been watching since birth was gone. The Flower had been a bright, forever-blooming beacon in his heart. Yugno started to sob. His surroundings were astir. He heard Torogai saying something and Balsa and the others making sounds of joy. But to him they all seemed like nothing more than moving silhouettes seen from far away. He slowly stood up and moved to a grassy patch a bit farther away from all of them, before sitting down again. His body felt sluggish, as if he were completely empty.

After singing with the Li, he was usually overflowing with energy. Now, for some reason, he just felt as if the light of life was gone from his body. He lied down on the grass and closed his eyes. He heard someone calling to him worriedly, but he waved them away. How long did he stay like that?

Eventually, he noticed that he was standing amidst a pale blue darkness. In the first moment after he composed himself, he realised that he was standing in that familiar inner garden. As he looked around, he spied a shadow standing away from him in the darkness. He slowly approached the small old lady, her skin black. “Master Torogai.”

Torogai was smiling, her expression much more serene than it was earlier that day.

“Is this inside the Flower’s dream?”

“No. I called you into my dream. When I touched you, you seemed awfully lonely.”

Yugno nodded minutely. “When the Flower disappeared, the light inside me did so too, it would seem. My heart has become awfully empty.”

Torogai reached out with her hand, and caressed Yugno’s cheek, like one would a small child’s. “Yugno, the Flower hasn’t disappeared. Look.”When Torogai opened her palm, atop her wrinkled skin rested a single seed.

“This is..!”

“Yes. It’s the Flower’s seed. The Flower’s Keeper left this in my hand at the end.” Torogai rolled the tiny seed atop her palm. “What in the world even is the Flower? When was it born? Where did it come from? Is that fire-coloured thing I saw even really a flower?”

The tiny brown seed atop Torogai’s palm looked exceedingly ordinary, but as Yugno watched it, its shape suddenly wavered and in its place appeared a large white seed instead. As he continued watching it in astonishment, its shape continued to waver and it returned to being a plain brown seed.

“As long as it keeps looking like a seed, it can change to be any colour or shape, but it can’t become, for example, a stone. Things that exist only within dreams can change their appearance limitlessly as long as they stay within the boundaries set by their inherent natures.”

Torogai looked up at Yugno. “Since the Flower obtained its form by being dreamed, it ended up being controlled by the dream that pollinated it, the First Queen’s. Even so, it still remained true to its nature of being pollinated, producing a seed, then scattering.”

Torogai screwed up her face lopsidedly. “The Flower’s Keeper is surely the power that protects that. A protector ensuring that a seed is left behind and that the flower scatters, even as it is controlled by dreams.”

“What does the Flower’s Guardian do then?”

Torogai smiled widely and chuckled at Yugno’s question. “The role of the Guardian was to protect you wasn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“Its original purpose was probably to protect you in the other world, by inviting a soul from that world and controlling the body left behind.”

“And that was twisted by the First Queen’s will?”

Torogai nodded while smiling, though suddenly that smile turned to a poisonous one. “But, probably, there was one common goal shared by the First Queen and the Flower; preventing you from cutting your ties with the Flower and running away. I’m sure both wills agreed on this one point when they sent the Flower’s Guardian to bring you back to the Flower on that night.”

Yugno felt his skin break out into goosebumps.

“But when the First Queen tried to crush your throat, that was not in accordance with the Flower’s will. The Flower’s Keeper said that he tried his best to not let the First Queen control the Flower completely. As deeply connected to the Flower as she was, she might have even sensed the Flower’s will on this matter. That’s why she feared that you would bring the wind of life and free the Dreams. To prevent this, she decided to send the Flower’s Guardian to attack you.”

Torogai picked up the seed from her palm. “The Flower is most likely a living organism that behaves like one of those flowers which have the wind carry their seeds to far away places. The fact that you became Li Tou Ruen, 'the one loved by the echoes', was surely not a coincidence. There isn’t a more suitable person to become the wind which carries the seeds than you, a person who lives a long life travelling from country to country and singing songs that change people’s lives and move their souls.”

Torogai continued. “I’m telling you this because when you told me that the scary mother in your nightmare said that the Flower’s Guardian would crush your throat so that you could never sing again, it made me wonder; why was she so fixated on you, on your song? But if we put it in this context, it makes sense doesn't it?”

Yugno laughed weakly. “And now my duty is done. That’s why I’ve become so empty, isn’t it?”

Torogai laughed. “Absolutely not. Your life has only just begun.”

Yugno shook his head sluggishly. “But, for some reason, I feel so tired. Even my desire for singing has dried up…”

Torogai gently stroked his hand while stifling her laughter. “Yugno, you’re a child of dawn and dusk. Like this pale blue darkness, you exist in the boundary between night and day.

“Like the cheerful light of the sun, your song has the power to brighten up people’s lives. The source of that power was your nightly dreaming. Sleep heals the body, getting rid of the tiredness of the day. Dreams, however, heal the soul. Even nightmares serve this purpose of healing. They help your soul’s deepest wounds heal similarly to exposing real wounds to the wind and drying them out. The Li resonated with your soul and birthed a Song. The power you have when you sing it is the power of dreams.”

Yugno bit his lip. Torogai asked quietly. “Do you want to continue singing? Or do you want to live like a normal human? Humans are strong creatures. Even if you lose your song, with time you’ll get used to the emptiness you feel now and eventually it will disappear completely. I will help you find some other path to follow. I’m sure you could have a peaceful life.”

Yugno’s face screwed up into a sad smile and he slowly shook his head. “I… I can’t live without singing.”

Torogai nodded. “Give me your hand, then.”

When he realised what Torogai was about to do he felt a chill in his spine. *It’s like that time.* He remembered the fear he felt on that distant day when he sang in front of the lake for the first time, as well as the feelings overshadowing his fear. *I’m at another crossroads.* How many times had he wondered what life would have awaited him if he had not sung by the lake that day, so long ago.

He knew now. Whatever happiness waited on the other side of the crossing, whatever misfortune awaited him on this side, it paled in comparison to his desire to sing. He finally held out his hand. Torogai placed the Flower's seed in his palm.

It was as warm as Torogai's skin, but as he watched it, it wavered and sank into his hand. Heat spread gradually to all parts of his body. With the heat, the memories of the Dreams still dozing within the seed rushed into Yugno's soul like a flood. He gasped and covered his face with both hands. Their feelings, their burning wishes, and the heart rending sadness of wishes gone unfulfilled, swirled within him.

Countless lives became a dizzying current of impressions as the long, long years people had spent living all surged into Yugno in a matter of seconds. Eventually, the whirlpool of Dreams sunk to the bottom of his soul. When the seed had completely melted into him, Yugno was changed through to his very core.

He let his hands fall slowly and raised his face.

His skin and hair remained that of a youngster in his twenties, but Torogai noticed that his eyes now were coloured by the passage of time. The boundless brightness that illuminated children's eyes disappeared, and in its place appeared the deep light of a person who could feel other people's pain as their own. Because the dreams of others had melted into his heart, he finally understood the pain hidden in dreaming. The pain of those who couldn't enter dreams of their own volition.

"Hold onto the Dreams tightly, you hear?" Torogai smiled faintly and whispered. "Your song might lose the easy cheer it had before. In exchange, you'll probably be able to move people deeply even without the spirits' help."

She paused. "When I leave this world, I'll call for you, so please send me to the other world with your song."

Yugno nodded. Torogai took his hand. "I don't know if ages ago, the Flower was borne of your soul, or if your soul was born from the Flower, or if in the beginning you were one. You're definitely entwined so profoundly that it's hard to separate the two of you."

Torogai looked at Yugno and whispered as if she were chanting a spell. "You're the child of dawn and dusk. The child of the pale blue darkness. You're the wind that takes the Flower's seeds and spreads them far into the world. The seed naps within you, and when you face your night, it'll sprout, take shape within your last dream, and invite over someone else's dream. Eventually a new Flower will bloom. It's probably been like this since forever. The end of one circle, is the beginning of another, you see?"

Yugno looked at Torogai. She clapped him on the shoulder as if she had regained her strength. "Fly with a cheerful song on your lips, son of my dream."

Yugno woke from his daze and slowly got up. He thought it would have been around dawn, but his surroundings were still pitch black. The light of the fire was flickering as he saw Balsa and the others worriedly crowd around Tanda. He felt like he should have been dreaming for a long time,

but it seemed that his conversation with Torogai did not take much of this world's time.

He saw her sitting up from where she was lying next to the fire. She looked around, searching for Yugno and smiled slightly when she found him. She stood up with a heave and walked over to Tanda's side.

For those interested:

1. Riano is written □□□in katakana.

Chapter 4 Part 5

Awakening

When something cold touched his face, Tanda woke up. He tried to open his eyes, but his eyelids felt heavy and he couldn’t.

“His left ankle is cleanly broken.”

“That must be Jin’s doing. The shoulder joint I dislocated is now back in place but the area around it is swollen badly. Oh yeah, I’m also pretty sure his left eardrum is ruptured.” Tanda recognised Balsa’s voice. It echoed strangely and he couldn't quite make out the words. He didn’t recognise the other voice at all.

“The biggest problem is exhaustion though, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He probably hasn’t eaten anything for a while either. I still can’t wrap my head around how he could have possibly reached here in such a short time with his ankle broken.”

He heard the sound of someone clearing their throat beside his ear and recognised it. “Yeah. It’s because he can’t feel tiredness or pain. We went on horseback, so we had to choose the longer, but horse-friendly, route. We did rest a few times too.”

As soon as he realised this was his Master’s voice, sensation returned to his entire body. He groaned. He felt the heaviness far more than the pain, as if lead had been poured into him.

A dry hand touched his cheek. “Tanda! Are you awake? Tanda, can you hear me?” He heard Balsa’s voice, but he wasn’t yet at a stage where he could

answer. “He’s groaning.”

“As he should be. It must be tough… Balsa, this isn’t like you. Stop panicking.” Tanda heard Torogai speak tiredly. “He’s fine. Well, not really fine, but he won’t die at least. Do you not trust my diagnosis?”

“I do. But, don’t you have something for the pain? The medicine you gave me earlier worked really well. Can’t we give him some of that?”

He heard a rustling noise. It sounded like some oil paper was being unwrapped. “Yeah, since it seems he’s conscious, let’s give him some medicine. Raise his head, please.”

He felt not just Balsa’s but also someone else’s hands support his body. He was raised very carefully, but still he felt a terrible dizziness. The cold cloth that had been placed on his forehead fell to his knees, and he could finally see. His surroundings were spinning, but as the dizziness faded, he could begin to vaguely make out an image of many worried faces looking at him. It was still in the middle of the night. The bonfire burned enthusiastically. He felt cool water enter his mouth.

“Tanda. Have some water. Do you understand me? Swallow the medicine. Make sure you don’t choke.”

The bitter taste of the medicine spread throughout his mouth. He managed to recognise the medicine as *raigol* root and briefly worried about its soporific properties before once again falling into a deep sleep.

The next time he woke up, white light was dancing on his eyelids. His whole face felt pleasantly warmed by the soft rays of the morning sun. He listened to the bustle of his surroundings with his eyes still closed. The pleasant smell of oil-baked fish cooking in the ashes of a fire wafted over.

“Is your shoulder ok?” He heard Chagum’s voice.

“Well, the bandage that Mr Shuga so kindly wrapped it in is a bit tight, so it hurts and is hard to move.” When Balsa answered, a man whose voice

Tanda had heard last night, but didn't know, continued the conversation.

"I'm sorry, but the blood loss was quite severe. The wound is quite deep."

Balsa laughed lowly. "Oh, I'm not complaining. I'm grateful that you patched me up."

"Indeed, especially as the guy who would usually do it is laid out over there." Tanda heard Torogai's mirth.

Tanda felt someone approach and cast a shadow on him. He felt a dry and warm hand on his forehead. He thought it was Balsa's. This time when he opened his eyes, he saw Balsa clearly. Her face, utterly unchanged despite half a year passing since he saw it last, wore an easy smile.

"Hi." Her low, pleasant voice sounded in his ear. Tanda also smiled faintly.

"I see you are back, then?" His voice came out frustratingly weak.

"Yeah. A lot happened these past six months. A lot of… so many mysterious things happened while I was on the move, and I found myself thinking 'if only you were with me' countless times."

A hard finger, calloused from years of spear usage, moved the hair stuck to Tanda's forehead ever so gently. "When you're a bit better, I'll tell you all about it. And about everything that happened while your soul was over there…"

Tanda nodded and closed his eyes. He was sucked into a deep sleep once more.

After watching Tanda drift off, Balsa stood up and returned to sit by the fire. Yugno was pulling out some *raada* from amidst the ashes and shaking them off with a practiced hand. "They're done. Let's eat."

Torogai held out her hand first. *Raada,* made from rice flour kneaded with water and salt then stretched out and grilled, was especially good when

wrapped around fish or meat.

Everyone started to wrap some grilled fish, or dried meat that they had brought with them, as they liked. Chagum noticed the Hunters only eating dried meat and called out to them. “Zen, Yun, eat some fish too. I said it was fine to fish here, so there’s nothing to worry about. The servants of the mountain villa eat the lake’s fish you know?” After hearing that, the two looked at each other and grabbed some fish.

“That was a rather mysterious night wasn’t it?” Shuga muttered, before turning to look at Yugno, who was stuffing his cheeks with *raada.* Zen, the usually quiet Hunter, broke his silence to the surprise of all. “I was obviously surprised by the Flower and the palace and all of that, but the biggest surprise by far was your singing. You must be Li Tou Ruen, ‘the one loved by the echoes’, right?”

Even Yun turned to face his comrade in his surprise. “What’s this Li thing?”

Zen wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “When I was still a kid, I used to travel with my aunt. She hired a Yakoo guide to lead us through a mountain pass. My aunt liked songs and sung all the time. When we got to a lake in the mountains, though, the guide asked her to stop. He said that the Li or echoes live on the shores of mountain lakes and if a good singer sings nearby, the Li will put them under a spell.
He continued after taking a bite. “That Yakoo man was a great storyteller. Apparently, when a good singer sings by a lake, the Li fall in love with them and cast a spell which makes their singing so amazing that they can move people’s hearts and bodies. I thought it was an interesting story but didn’t take it seriously.”

Zen looked at Yugno. “When I heard you sing, it was like being struck by lightning. ‘Ah, this is it’, I thought. This could only be the song of Li Tou Ruen, ‘the one loved by the echoes’, exactly like in that old man’s stories.”

Yugno shrugged his shoulders and smiled, but he did not answer Zen either way.

Once they finished eating and packing up, Chagum spoke to Zen. “Zen, could you carry Tanda back to his house? Balsa’s shoulder is hurt, and I don’t think Yugno could carry Tanda all the way back. I’m also worried about Jin.”

“Yes.”

Chagum bitterly smiled when he noticed the surreptitious look that Zen had given Yun before answering. “Don’t worry; I will return straight to the capital with Shuga.” He then turned to Balsa. “I didn’t expect to meet you here again but I’m glad I did.”

Balsa smiled and softly put a hand on Chagum’s shoulder. “Yeah. I’ve got a feeling that there might be more of these unexpected meetings in the future. Our fates seem to be strongly connected after all.”

Chagum inhaled sharply, pressed his lips together tightly and turned his face away. They stayed in silence for just a moment, before Chagum looked at Shuga. “Shuga…”

Chagum started whispering with his face still turned away from Balsa. “Shuga told me something interesting, while we were on our way here, about how worlds come together and then move apart like sea currents. I wonder if the fates shared between two people might be like that too.”

The palace, wrapped in silence and surrounded by the sprouting greenness of the early summer mountain, was reflected in the lake. As white mist crossed over the water, the upside-down reflection of the palace disappeared as if hidden by clouds. An utterly ordinary sight under the morning sun. The ordinariness was reassuring.

Chagum looked back at Balsa and spoke to her with his voice back under control. “When Tanda wakes up, thank him for me.”

Balsa nodded.

The wind disturbed the reed bed as it blew through it. A single bird flapped its wings and used the air current to climb, then glided over the lake and

disappeared.

For those interested:

1. Raigol is written □□□□ in katakana.
2. Raada is written □□□ in katakana.

Epilogue

Beyond the forest a young, verdant green rice paddy, swaying in the wind, extended as far as the eye could see. The song of the cicadas incessantly poured over everything. People were busily working as the dazzlingly bright rays of light beat down on them. Weeding the quickly growing grass from the rice paddies was a tough job.

“Can you see where we are?” Balsa, who was lending Tanda her shoulder as a crutch as they walked, asked.

“Wait a second. Oh, it’s over there. They’re weeding over there next to the edge of that paddy.”

Balsa looked over to where Tanda was pointing. A solidly built woman was diligently weeding. When the girl weeding by her side started talking to her, she put her hand on her lower back and responded.

Tanda muttered “Well, this place never changes.”

Balsa laughed at him. “You’re too nice, you know? You risked your life and didn’t even get much in the way of thanks. Even though he’s your brother, it’s ok to expect some kind of reward…”

“Absolutely not. A thanks from him is enough for me. And I did get a mountain of eggplants and cucumbers, you know? Oh wait, of course you know; you and Master already ate most of them.” Tanda sat down in the shade of a tree, taking care to not damage his injured left leg.

“Also, it’s not like I did all that much. I mostly just got in your and Jin’s way. I wouldn’t even have made it without Mr. Yugno.”

Balsa leaned against the tree. “Yugno, huh. He didn’t even say goodbye properly before leaving on another journey, and we haven’t heard anything since. Who knows where he’s singing these days. He was pretty mysterious, wasn’t he?”

“When we went to visit your niece, she said something pretty smart. That Yugno is like his songs; he moves the heart, but comes and goes like the wind.”

“I’m glad she understood that in the end.”

Balsa laughed. “She understood that from the beginning. You can’t help having those kinds of feelings though, even if you understand. You can’t do anything about it. She fell in love with the wind that passed through on its journey from far away, rather than with Yugno himself.”

Tanda smiled wryly. He had still not forgiven Yugno for enticing such a soft-hearted girl with his song. While she did manage to return in the end, she might have died had they made even a single mistake along the way.

But there was no use in lecturing the wind, either. Master Torogai said that it was precisely because Yugno was that way that he could carry the seed of the Flower within his soul. Those words that she said while telling Tanda the whereabouts of the seed, still remained in his heart.

"I handed the seed over to him because no one else was suitable as a host. The Flower feeds on people's dreams. That's why it chooses its hosts from those who live in this world. However, the Flower is too heavy for normal people. Only a soul born of the Flower and a human could shoulder that burden. I didn't get this in the past, but I feel like I now get why the Flower's Keeper chose me as the mother of the host. It's precisely because I had a soul suited to being a magic weaver; I think he could feel that I had the strength to get involved with people's dreams and still go on living."

When she said that, Tanda couldn't help but ask if he lacked such a strength.

Torogai stared at Tanda for a while before answering. "Of course you've got the strength. But you're too nice, so there's always a risk that when you get involved with people's dreams that you may lose your life. If Yugno is a child of dawn and dusk, you, Tanda, are a child of high noon. You think of others first. You're like a kind spring light. Yugno is enthralled by songs. He can sacrifice anyone and anything for singing. You wouldn't accept the seed of a Flower that possibly lured people's souls to their deaths, even if you had to throw away your magic weaving as a result. But you know what? There are things that only a child of high noon can do. No one is all-powerful. There are things that you can do that I wouldn't be able to do no matter how hard I tried."

Can Master Torogai see my limits, I wonder? As she said, the world that can be seen with magic weaving is like a bottomless swamp. The deeper one dives, the farther the scenery spreads out before them. Those who go deep enough might come down with a fever, reminiscent of a powerful madness strong enough to lead those afflicted with it to cast themselves aside without a second thought. Is such a thing inside me as well?

Tanda felt cold shivers run through his stomach.

"What's wrong?" Tanda returned to his senses upon hearing Balsa's voice.

“Ehh…” Tanda sighed and spoke his thoughts. “I just thought that it would get pretty lonely to drift through life from place to place, even for someone like Yugno.”

Tanda’s words reminded Balsa of what Yugno had told her before.

> *“The Li gave me an almost terrifyingly wonderful joy. But in exchange they took it all. Everything of mine up until that point, and even the future I would have had from then on.”*

She whispered in response “Yeah. It would.” before turning her head to look up at the verdant foliage. “But, there is joy in it for him too. Just like those farmers, who experience a different kind of joy when they spread their roots into the earth.”

As Tanda looked at Balsa he said, with a smile in his voice, “That kind of sounded like you were talking about yourself.”

“I am. It’s about me as well.” Balsa looked up at the sky and narrowed her eyes. “I met Chagum and went back to Kanbal for a bit. So much has happened. I feel like I’ve finally escaped from the ghost of misfortune. You know this already, but Jiguro threw away his country to protect my life. He threw away the life he was meant to live. He had to kill his friends to survive. What a cruel fate… I was always thankful for that, but I also felt that I had incurred a debt I could never repay... It took me so long to realise that that was a huge mistake.”

Tanda was shocked. This was the first time Balsa had spoken about herself in this way. She looked at him with a peaceful expression.

“I should have been unbelievably happy that he cared for me so much. There is a joy to be found in protecting someone you love, you see. I want to think that, despite having such a life, Jiguro felt this kind of joy. When I was protecting Chagum, I was happy. I was risking my life for a stranger, but still, I was happy.”

A shadow of a smile graced Balsa’s lips. “I’ve been cursing my misfortune ever since I was a kid, but it’s taken me this long to learn to admit my happiness too. That’s pathetic. I acted like it was because of my accursed fate that I had to go around fighting and killing people. I needed such an excuse to come to terms with the blood on my hands. When I noticed my happiness, I couldn’t make these excuses anymore. Yet, when I think of what I want to do now, I can’t think of anything other than being a bodyguard.”

A normal person would surely think of a few different paths to take here, for example, to open a business or a martial arts school with the savings they had accumulated so far. But some part of Balsa, throbbing deep in her heart, still didn’t want to live that way. The black rage that she had held onto since a young age was not so easily quelled.

As she watched the sunlight filter through the tree canopies and dance on the grass, she whispered. “I have caused and will continue to cause strangers, and maybe eventually myself, to die because a part of me cannot let go of its desire to fight. This is my inexcusable darkness.”

Tanda sighed, then spoke with an unusually severe expression. “Idiot. At least let yourself make excuses! If you hadn’t been involved in that ugly throne succession plot, your ugly desires might have been completely different now.”

Balsa looked at Tanda. A slow smile spread across her lips. “In other circumstances… Maybe if I had been born to a loving family of farmers, I might have been surrounded by five or six kids by now. I might have been a mother. I would have had other reasons to suffer and I might have been complaining that maybe if I had been born into a different life, I might have had more interesting and fun things to do.”

Balsa shook her head as she shooed a black fly away from her eye. “These maybes are what I dream about when things get tough. When I wake up, I’m back to being the normal me though. I haven’t been given the kind of life I can escape into a dream from.”

Tanda closed his eyes. An outburst of cicada song enveloped them completely, like a sudden rain. “There are people who didn’t come back from their dreams.”

“Eh?”

“Like Master Torogai. She awakened from the Flower’s dream, but she didn’t return to her home. She became a magic weaver instead.” Tanda raised his eyes and vaguely looked in the direction of the people working the paddies. The life he threw away, when he was once at a crossroads, was over there.
It had been twenty-two years since he veered off that path alone, following the faintly shining birds of Torogai’s soul flying in the twilight sky, into the dark middle of the mountains.

Tanda closed his eyes and remembered the almost choking smell of the Flower. The sight of the swaying reflection of the lit-up petals in the inner garden's pool of water amidst the darkness of night. The many happily dozing Dreams inside…

The thoughts that were suppressed during daytime came freely to the forefront of one's mind when they slept. If he had been one of the Dreams within the Flower, what would he have dreamt of? Would he have been able to wake up from that dream?

People whose souls are too large for their bodies can only freely dance when in the open skies called dreams. But that's also precisely why those dreams can become traps they want to escape from.

Tanda thought back to the words Master Torogai once said.

> *"Those who become magic weavers are those who have had the experience of being flung about by their soul and having been pushed to their limits. You were too young and could have not noticed, but during that dusk when you were eight, you were at your limit too. Those faintly glowing soul birds are beautiful, but if a normal child even saw them, they'd find the light terrifying. Those soul birds dance at the edge of death after all. When you were drawn in by the birds and came running, just like that child who was drawn in by a spirit's voice and was swallowed up by the river, you were actually drawn towards death."*
>
> *Torogai grinned after having said that. "But that time, instead of dying, you met a teacher like me. And once you get pulled into the circle of magic weavers, it becomes a lot harder to die. Before you know it, you learn the toughness necessary to walk the tightrope between life and death. Tanda, remember this well. The more a trainee magic weaver like you, gets absorbed into magic weaving, the harder it is for them to see anything but darkness. Precisely because this world is invisible to normal people, we start to think that our world holds all the power. We start to take normal people lightly. But real magic weavers know the truth. The powers of the night and the*

powers of the day are not superior and inferior but instead equals that complement one another. You'll know one day too, about the toughness of the ordinary people who can't see souls, the strength of those who can live normal lives."

She looked at Tanda with unusually serious eyes and added. "But even tough people can become lost. They sometimes carry dreams that can't be held in check with the powers of the day. Magic weavers must bring back the souls that have flown all the way to the edge of death. We, who stand on the boundary between the powers of the day and the night, are The Guardians of Dreams."

Tanda raised his eyes and looked upon the landscape, illuminated as the white light of high noon danced across. The loud sound of the cicada song resounded once again. He returned to his conversation with Balsa. "It's about time for the *julso* to bear fruit. Since the summer has been this hot, the winter will surely be a terrible one. We'll have to prepare more cold medicine than usual. Will you help me gather some?"

"Yeah, sure. Shall we get going soon, then?" Balsa grabbed Tanda's hand and helped him stand up.

They heard a song from the direction of the paddy fields. Someone was probably singing to distract themselves from the hardship of work. Soon other voices joined and became a merry chorus echoing across the summer sky.

The grass grows on a summer's day. Really, really grows.
If this grass had been rice, we'd be rich by now.

Oh world, you're out of our hands.
Oh summer's day, you're out of our hands.

The end.

For those interested:

1. Julso is written □□□□ in katakana.

Notes

[←1]
A dan is a unit of time roughly equal to one hour.